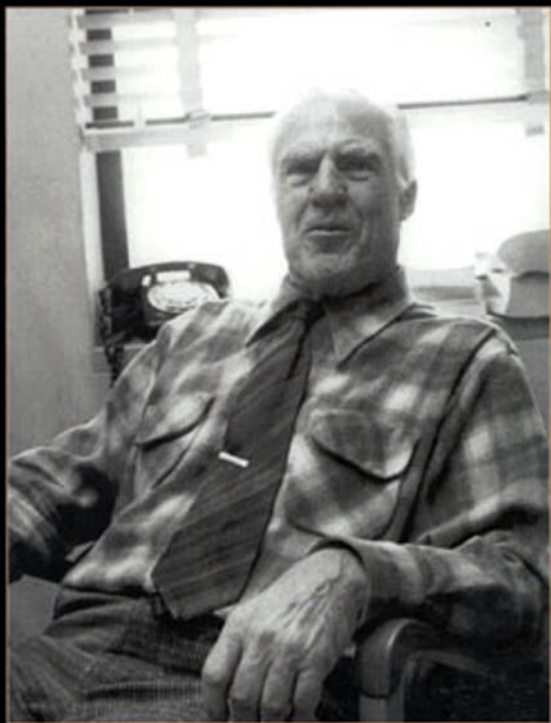


HERBERT BLUMER

EDITED AND INTRODUCED BY THOMAS J. MORRIONE



GEORGE HERBERT  
MEAD AND  
HUMAN CONDUCT

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# GEORGE HERBERT MEAD AND HUMAN CONDUCT

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Thomas J. Morrione



A Division of  
ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, INC.  
*Walnut Creek • Lanham • New York • Toronto • Oxford*

## ALTAMIRA PRESS

A division of Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.  
1630 North Main Street, #367  
Walnut Creek, CA 94596  
www.altamirapress.com

Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.  
A wholly owned subsidiary of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.  
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200  
Lanham, MD 20706  
PO Box 317  
Oxford  
OX2 9RU, UK

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Blumer, Herbert, 1900–1987.

George Herbert Mead and human conduct / Herbert Blumer ; edited and introduced by Thomas J. Morriane.

p. cm.

Introduction—George Herbert Mead and human conduct—Objects—The self—The individual act—The social act.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-7591-0467-0 (cloth : alk. paper)—ISBN 0-7591-0468-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Symbolic interactionism. 2. Mead, George Herbert, 1863–1931. 3. Social psychology. I. Morriane, Thomas J. II. Title.

HM499.B58 2003

302—dc21

2003012181

Printed in the United States of America

©™ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48–1992.

*To the memory of Herbert Blumer, extraordinary scholar,  
inspiring mentor, and dear friend.*

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# CONTENTS



Preface	ix
Acknowledgments	xix
Editor's Introduction	I
CHAPTER 1	
Introduction	13
CHAPTER 2	
George Herbert Mead and Human Conduct	17
CHAPTER 3	
Objects	39
CHAPTER 4	
The Self	57
CHAPTER 5	
The Individual Act	69
CHAPTER 6	
The Social Act	95
Editor's Introduction to the Appendixes	103
APPENDIX 1	
Herbert Blumer and David L. Miller: On George Herbert Mead's Contributions to Understanding Human Conduct	109
APPENDIX 2	
Supplementary Materials	155



APPENDIX 3

Herbert Blumer: A Biography	179
References	185
Index	191
About the Editor	197

## PREFACE



IN ADDITION TO Herbert Blumer's heretofore unpublished manuscript *George Herbert Mead and Human Conduct*, this volume includes an appendix containing Blumer's correspondence with David L. Miller pertaining to Mead's view of the self, social action, and social reality, as well as some supplementary writings on related subjects. As a prelude to these materials, it may be appropriate to comment on the origin of this book and to provide a brief overview of Blumer's scholarly emphasis.

Herbert Blumer and I first met in 1971, after he heard a paper I presented comparing his views of social action with those developed by Talcott Parsons. As with countless other authors working on subjects in which he was interested, Herb subsequently engaged me in an extended, rigorous analysis of the topic. Recognizing our mutual interests in the study of human group life, I later spent most summers and "vacations," as well as two sabbaticals (one for two years) between 1977 and 1986, working with Herb at the University of California, Berkeley, and at his home.

During this time, we pursued a number of projects together. Over the course of our association, we also discussed his wishes about the disposition of his scholarly papers, and he entrusted me with their care. They are being organized into a collection at Colby College. This volume constitutes a sample drawn from this larger body of unpublished material. Two additional volumes, tentatively entitled *Social Psychology: Fundamentals of Symbolic Interactionism* and *Social Processes*, gleaned from these materials are slated to follow.

When Blumer was in his eighties, we reviewed his earlier papers with an eye toward their possible publication. As one might expect of a productive academic's files, Herb's unpublished materials covered a wide range of subjects and varied tremendously in character. Some statements were handwritten working notes. Some were intended for class lectures and had a hastily composed quality, while others were more comprehensive and detailed. Some materials were organized

according to subject, but other pieces were scattered throughout his folders, often appearing as side comments clipped to text under review for a lecture or paper. The materials ranged from nearly complete manuscripts (like the chapters in this volume), edited drafts in progress, and carefully reworked essays, to sentence fragments, unfinished paragraphs, sketchy outlines, and lists of adjectives describing aspects of social reality that caught his attention. However, despite the fact that he explored an exceptionally diverse range of topics, and one finds vast variations in the form and completeness of these items, Herb's writings embody a coherent view of social reality and human action.

In our last work session, Herb reminded me that the most significant point about "this whole perspective" is that it presents a new view of *action*. In my judgment, the social sciences have yet to appreciate its revolutionary character. Nevertheless, Blumer's portraying all levels of magnitude and complexity of social life in terms of action remains the hallmark of his life's work. This brief overview of central themes in his work cannot possibly capture its potency or relevance for theory and methodology in sociology and in the social sciences more generally<sup>1</sup>; however, it may help frame the volume for those less familiar with his work.

Although Herb (Blumer, especially 1928, 1937a, 1966b, 1981) focused considerable attention on the sociological and social psychological implications of George Herbert Mead's (1934, 1938) pragmatism, his more general objective was to develop valid pictures of social processes embodied in and formed through social action. This emphasis surfaces continually as the organizing theme in his writings, lectures, and discussions. More precisely, he envisioned individual and collective social action as ongoing accomplishments achieved through the process of symbolic interaction wherein people, as symbol-using creatures, do things mindfully in regard to themselves and others.

Emphasizing broad implications of Mead's theoretical point of view for the study of all varieties of human action, Herb used the generic term "acting unit" to refer to instances of human behavior from solitary acts to all manner of collective events (ranging from two people in interaction to the broadest realms of international relations). Concomitantly, he insisted on grounding scholarly knowledge about the human condition in the empirical world of people's experiences.

Describing social life and society as instances of enacted realities, Herb spoke about people confronting "ongoing streams of situations" and "forging lines of action." Thus, whether puzzling about the relation between structure and process, change and persistence, thought and action, individual and society, or observing tangled interrelationships among those engaged in community life, he invariably directed analytic attention to people's adjustments as a central feature of social

existence. He routinely noted that their adjustments are pursued through juxtapositions of reflectively achieved covert and overt action. Herb envisioned social reality as dependent upon people knowingly engaging an emergent world of action and participating meaningfully within a broader realm of ongoing situated *symbolic* interaction.

Blumer (1937a, 171) introduced the term “symbolic interactionist” in an attempt to label philosophers, sociologists, and social psychologists sharing a pragmatist position regarding the nature of social phenomena. His version of pragmatism locates empirical social reality in ongoing and always situated adjustive, codeterminative relationships among people acting in worlds of objects. Thus he readily acknowledged contributions of the philosophers George Herbert Mead, John Dewey, William James, and James Baldwin to the underlying principles of this view. He also appreciated greatly the more empirically grounded sociological portrayals of action presented by Charles H. Cooley, William I. Thomas, Robert Park, and Ellsworth Faris. He embraced their work because their analyses of society, social structure, and activity reflect the ways people attach meanings to things they encounter in the world as well as the way they construct acts mindful of these meanings.

The notion of situated interaction and activity (Morrione 1985) is as central to Blumer’s theory as his contention that people’s meaningful behavior is never an automatic reflex. Thus he viewed symbolic interaction as *the* essential process through which all social phenomena (including structures) are created, maintained, and changed. So, whether people view things as “right” or “wrong,” confused or clear, novel or routine, or whether or not their thoughts and acts are rational, tinged with fear, love, jealousy, panic, hatred, anger, lust, greed, or envy, their interpretations of situations constitute frames in regard to which humanly enacted realities are achieved.

Because of his emphasis on people’s definitions of situations as precursors to activity, Blumer is sometimes depicted as a subjectivist and a psychological reductionist. He was neither (Morrione 1988; Prus 1996, Shalin 1986). Like Mead and Dewey, he (Blumer 1986, 22) dismissed “[t]he traditional position of idealism” because it does not acknowledge the world’s obdurate character. In extreme form, its singular emphasis on images leads to solipsism, “subjectivism,” or individualistic reductionism, positions Blumer considered entirely unacceptable.

Like Mead and Dewey, Blumer opposed the realists’ contention that things have objective qualities in and of themselves. Rejecting the idea that the world takes on a fixed form, he (Blumer 1986, 23) said, “the reality of the empirical world appears in the ‘here and now’ and is continually recast with the achievement

of new discoveries." Explaining that pragmatism *blends* elements of realism and idealism, he (Blumer, letter to Irwin Deutscher, April 17, 1979) said, "Mead was a pragmatist in philosophical stance and so am I. . . . [F]or pragmatism, reality does not exist in consciousness, nor is the reality eternally real, independent of human experience with it."<sup>2</sup>

Because they cast the actor in a passive role, Blumer also rejected cultural, social, biological, and environmental determinism, as well as related instinct and behaviorist theories of human action. He accepted the idea of the *inseparability* and *codetermination* of the organism and the environment, the actor and the social world, the knower and what is known and, therefore, (along with Dewey, Mead, and Cooley) found no value in theories that disregard the distinctly human process of interpretation and people's ongoing reflective adjustment to the world.

Blumer located both action and the creation of meaning in an *ever-emergent situated present* that is cognitively, behaviorally, and intersubjectively *inseparable* from the past and the future. For him, acts and situations emerging in this past-future nexus are formed and managed through symbolic interaction, through people's meaningful activities and interchanges. Mindful of Dewey's (1896) classic rebuttal of the stimulus-response model of behavior, wherein action is portrayed as an automatic "response" to stimuli, Blumer reasoned that people are active constructors of "lines of action." As Mead did when considering the origin of this human capacity, Blumer (1937a, 152) emphasized "the active nature of the child, the plasticity of this nature, and the importance of the unformed impulse . . . [a] view taken by the group of social psychologists who may be conveniently labeled 'symbolic interactionists.'"

Thus, when first noting the distinctive features of this new perspective, Herb stated:

The symbolic interactionists view social interaction as primarily a communicative process in which . . . a person responds not to what another individual says or does, but to the meaning of what he says or does. Their view, consequently, might be regarded as inserting a middle term of interpretation into the stimulus-response couplet so that it becomes stimulus-interpretation-response. (Blumer 1937a, 171)

Thirty-two years later, he (Blumer 1986, 2) summarized succinctly the fundamental theoretical position of symbolic interactionism, saying:

Symbolic interactionism rests in the last analysis on three simple premises. The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them. Such things

include everything that the human being may note in his world—physical objects, such as trees or chairs; other human beings, such as a mother or a store clerk; categories of human beings, such as friends or enemies; institutions such as a school or government; guiding ideals, such as individual independence or honesty; activities of others, such as their commands or requests; and such situations as an individual encounters in his daily life. The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters.<sup>3</sup>

Blumer elaborated on his position by describing six “root images” that epitomize symbolic interactionism. These include “[1] human groups or societies, [2] social interaction, [3] objects, [4] the human being as an actor, [5] human action, and [6] the interconnectedness of lines of action” (Blumer 1986). Explaining these core ideas, he first reminded us that any group, collectivity, or assembly of people of any size or organizational complexity involves people “doing things,” engaging in action and interaction. His second root image focused on the nature of social interaction, portraying people as active agents who “take account of what each other is doing or about to do . . . to direct their own conduct or to handle their situations (Blumer 1986, 8).” While sizing up situations and “forging” their lines of activity, people take themselves and others into account in ways that acknowledge their own and others’ past, ongoing, or implied future acts. Blumer (1986, 68–70) crafted his third root image in a way that reveals the human ability to create and live in a world comprised of socially constructed meanings. For example, an object was any physical, social, or abstract thing to which someone might refer in a meaningful sense in the course of self-reflection or interaction with others.

Because objects have no intrinsic meaning, adequate explanation of what people do is contingent upon analysts of human action learning the meanings that people assign to the objects that make up their world as well as how they “act on the basis of the meanings.” The meanings that people assign to things are the products of the interactions they have with themselves and others. People also have the ability to modify, clarify, extend, or otherwise adjust them. In the process of developing these dialogues, an actor creates and uses objects to “construct and guide his action instead of merely releasing it in response to factors playing on him or acting through him. He may do a miserable job in constructing his action, but he has to construct it” (Blumer 1986, 15). The idea that people create objects

and shape their acts in terms of the meanings they give to objects (rather than simply respond to stimuli) is central to Herb's conception of "the human being as an actor" and to his view of action (root images four and five).

For Blumer all meaningful activity *is* social activity. Thus his view of social action emphasizes the importance of the role played by interpretation, as the human self-reflective capacity to envision oneself as an object of one's own acts. This process allows us to direct our own action. As he (1986, 15) says, "[A]ction on the part of a human being consists of taking account of various things that he notes and forging a line of conduct on the basis of how he interprets them." Accordingly, while human activity is "built up" and situated in time and in physical and social space, it is achieved through self-indication and attentiveness to others' viewpoints and practices. This is the case in all instances of human action, whether one is getting a drink of water at a water cooler where others are present (one of his favorite examples) or involved in crafting an international peace treaty.

The idea that action is "built up" becomes evident when one envisions social reality as an ongoing process composed of *subacts and subsituations*. Herb and I discussed the notion of subacts and subsituations one morning after sharing a particularly harrowing commute to work. Casual reflection revealed that "taking a bus" comprises a potentially infinite array of contingent subsituations and acts, including walking, getting change, negotiating construction barricades, dodging other persons, checking one's watch, stepping over curbs and potholes, and attending to stop lights, crosswalks, street signs, cars, and so forth. Larger acts, like "getting to work," are achieved only as one navigates through various subactivities and subsituations. Very large-scale social phenomena, such as social movements (Blumer 1946), collective protest (Blumer 1978), and industrialization, are built up of great numbers of complexes of interlinked or "joint" acts (Blumer's sixth root image). Although largely ignored until recently (Maines 1988; Maines and Morrione 1990), this view of macrosocial phenomena is particularly evident in his article on "Social Problems as Collective Behavior" (Blumer 1971) and in his (1990) book *Industrialization as an Agent of Social Change*.

Because most scholars have been unfamiliar with the full range of Blumer's (1986, 16) analyses of "joint or collective action in which numbers of individuals are implicated . . . [i.e.] groups, institutions, organizations, and social classes," his version of symbolic interactionism is sometimes depicted mistakenly as microlevel sociology (Maines 1988). Rather than having a "micro" focus, ignoring large-scale social structures, Herb envisioned collective action and societal organization as accomplished through "fitting together" people's subacts into "macro" processes. This perspective, thus, unites "macro" and "micro" (terms he never used) worlds of human social life in coherent ways that otherwise cannot be achieved.

Howard Becker (1988, 18) partially addresses this feature of Blumer's standpoint when he says:

Blumer's most striking concept is the idea of the collective act: Any human event can be understood as the result of the people involved (keeping in mind that there might be a very large number) continually adjusting what they do in the light of what others do, so that each individual's line of action "fits" into what the others do. That can only happen if human beings typically act in non-automatic fashion, and instead construct a line of action by continually taking account of what others do in response to their earlier actions. . . . To complete the system, human beings can only act in the way the theory requires if they can incorporate the responses of others into their own acts and thus anticipate what will probably happen. If everyone can and does do that, complex joint acts can occur.

This fitting-together process occurs despite tremendous variations in the character of acts. As is often the case in economic, political, and religious arenas of social life, for example, complex and large-scale joint acts and many smaller-scale joint acts have a cooperative character, while conflict, competition, and detachment characterize others. Despite such variation in these "interlinkages," Herb noted that "fitting together lines of action" pertains to all forms of association wherein mutual adjustment occurs as actors attend to one another's developing lines of action. People's acts may be intimate and intense or relatively impersonal and casual. They may be complex or simple and may entail relatively direct or extensively mediated relations among participants. They may be novel or routine, pursued by large or small groups within a community or nation, and may meet with broad approval or evoke sharp criticism and stigmatization. But, despite the infinite variability of individual and collective lines of action, people routinely fit them together, and patterns often emerge and persist over time.

As Blumer (Wiseman 1970, xi) stated, "[G]roup life in any given area is a moving process, tending to follow regularized forms but allowing for both differences in individual lines of action and shifts in the regularized forms." Recognizing the ubiquity of diversity and conflict as sources of novelty and change in the social world, Blumer (1986, 17–18) represented persistent patterns, enduring organizations, or social "structures" as moving complexes of actions and interactions, sometimes with "extended connections" (Blumer 1986, 19) that are accomplished through minded activity.<sup>4</sup> Regardless, however, of whether or not individual lines of action merge into larger, more inclusive networks, interlinkages, or structures, their outcomes are not given in advance.



Blumer envisioned all social, psychological, and physical phenomena as having emergent “careers” or “natural histories.” These sequential flows mark the trajectories of their existence. His analyses of the self, individual and social acts, situations, society, industrial and race relations, collective behavior, fashion, social movements, social problems, group life, interaction, human relationships, role-taking, communication, as well as indication, interpretation, and definition, all imply or reflect explicitly a career or natural history notion of process.

Viewed this way, social life is an infinitely extendable complex of collective endeavors with indeterminate vectors, involving the formation of shared understandings and definitions about what is going on and how future actions might be made relevant and sensible in the light of continually emerging situations. Regardless of the extent to which completing a collective act requires cooperation and can be facilitated through routines of various sorts, it engages people’s capacity for self-reflection and adjustment. All collective activity, for this reason, implies degrees of unpredictability.

Blumer contended that social structures are comprised of acting and interacting individuals and groups. He reasoned that, like all forms of social reality, they are caught up in the interplay of opposing processes of persistence and change embodied in people’s situated and self-reflectively guided actions and interactions (Morrione 1998). For this reason, as well as because of the influence of out-of-awareness events on situations, their ongoing careers are never fully predictable. This notion of “structure as process” informs his (Blumer 1986, 1971) views of society and social structures as well as interchanges of competing economic, ethnic, political interest, or “power” groups (Blumer, especially 1937b, 1950, 1954b, 1958a, 1965a, 1971).<sup>5</sup> Thus, as Herb reminded me in our last meeting, social reality is always situated and consists of action that is created, sustained, and changed in an infinite and indeterminate stream of interpenetrating, overlapping, humanly achieved social moments. Using this fundamental insight to inform the basic tenets of symbolic interactionism, he provided a methodological guide and conceptual framework applicable to analysis of the full range of human action, association, and collective activity.

## Notes

1. Until recently, scholars tended to focus on Blumer’s work on enacted features of human group life and on developing a theoretical and methodological approach for studying social life in the making (e.g., Blumer 1928, 1954a, 1962, 1986, 1971). However, in fact, he examined a very wide range of topics, including (1) adolescent experiences with movies (Blumer 1970b; Blumer and Hauser 1933) and drugs (Blumer et al. 1967), (2) race relations and prejudice (1939c, 1955, 1958a; Blumer and Duster 1980), (3) social problems (1971),

(4) labor relations (1947, 1951, 1958b), (5) social development (1966a), (6) fashion (1968, 1969), (7) collective behavior (1939a, 1946, 1959), (8) industrialization (1990), and research methodology (1939b, 1940a, 1954b, 1956b, 1986). Although one finds great coherence in Blumer's considerations of theoretical and methodological concerns related to symbolic interaction, there also is an interesting divide running through his work. At the risk of oversimplifying this point, it appears that Blumer's work that was more directly concerned with symbolic interaction was inspired more by G.H. Mead, while various of his other materials (e.g., race relations, early articles on collective behavior, and fads and fashions) appear to be more influenced by Robert Park. (See, for example, Abbott and Gaziano [1995] for insights into Blumer's academic relationships with Park and other Chicago School sociologists.)

2. Commenting on linkages between interactionist thought and pragmatism, Dimitri Shalin (1986, 13) addresses aspects of Blumer's emphasis:

Interactionists accepted the pragmatists' thesis that the world is not inherently determinate, that it is open to multiple determinations, which led them to the pioneering view of society as the pluralistic universe continuously produced by the collective efforts of individuals. Society-in-itself gave way in their work to society-in-the-making, the study of structural givens to the study of the production of social reality as objective and meaningful. With this reorientation, interactionists had to find their own way of coming to grips with structural properties of social life without glossing over its emergent characteristics. They also had to provide a dialectical account of the individual as both the product and the producer of society. The view of society as social interaction can be seen as an attempt at resolving these vexing problems placed on the agenda by pragmatist philosophy.

3. Later in the cited text (Blumer 1986, 50), and focusing on action more directly, Blumer outlines four central features of symbolic interaction:

(1) people, individually and collectively, are prepared to act on the basis of the meanings of the objects that comprise their world; (2) the association of people is necessarily in the form of a process in which they are making indications to one another and interpreting each other's indications; (3) social acts, whether individual or collective, are constructed through a process in which actors note, interpret, and assess the situations confronting them; and (4) the complex interlinkages of acts that comprise organization, institutions, division of labor, and networks of interdependency are moving and not static affairs.

4. Speaking to this point, Greg Stone (Letter to Blumer, February 16, 1980) implies that Blumer encouraged him to think of social structure as "structuring," as a "gerund, not a noun," and certainly never as an abstract "force" determining action.

5. The notion of "structure as process" is not unique to Blumer. Thus James (1920) refers to this process of adjustment as "becoming." Mead (1938) and Dewey (1938) develop similar notions, asserting that sustaining, patterning, and changing social reality are accomplished through individual and collective acts. More contemporarily, Giddens (1984) offers a related interpretation of structure as process.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



THE GENEROUS OUTPOURING of assistance I received from everyone I contacted about this project was overwhelming. Invariably, Herbert Blumer's colleagues and students assisted enthusiastically in identifying and obtaining material. Their deep respect and affection for Herb was clearly evident in all they did. I am very much indebted to Blumer's University of Chicago students Oscar Shabbat, Jack London, Frank Miyamoto, and Fred Davis for sending me their class notes and comments about courses they took from him. Mary Miller graciously gave me permission to include David Miller's correspondence with Blumer. Anselm Strauss, Arlene Daniels, Tamotsu Shibutani, Howard Becker, Troy Duster, Stanford Lyman, John Kitsuse, and David Maines offered encouragement and shared freely their insights into Blumer's views. Robert Prus's comments on early drafts were especially helpful. Terry Arendell shared with me an unpublished transcript of her 1986–1987 interviews with Herb about his life.

Colby College research and travel grants supported my work with Blumer over the years. Colby's concern for the preservation of Blumer's work and the dissemination of his ideas led to the College's establishing the "Herbert Blumer Collection." Colby College Social Science Grant 01.2268 enabled me to secure the assistance of Russell Jones to prepare this book's index. Craig Stanton, a University of California, Berkeley, student, helped me to catalog Blumer's papers. Colby students David Fearon, Tim Nicholson, Holly Cox, and Kristen Heim assisted with preparing Blumer's material for publication. Jean Margolis, Lucia Torres, Carol Hatch, and Elsa Trantor, sociology support staff at Berkeley, graciously provided clerical assistance during my visits. Andrew Abbott and his research assistant Erin York at the University of Chicago offered archival information about courses that Herb taught there. Colby's Karen Bourassa retyped papers and manuscripts from the collection, and Jennifer Voter assisted me with the final preparation of the volume.

I am especially indebted to AltaMira Press director Mitch Allen for his enthu-

siastic support of this project. His editorial assistance has helped illuminate the larger and enduring relevance of Blumer's ideas.

Members of the Blumer family were steadfastly helpful and always interested in my progress. His daughters Linda and Leslie and his grandson, Brett, participated along the way. Marcia Blumer's hospitality never failed to make me feel welcome whenever I visited.

My wife, Nancy, and sons, Tom and Doug, always had words of encouragement for me and patiently listened to me, read and discussed drafts, and traveled with me whenever I asked for their help.

My greatest debt of gratitude is to Herbert Blumer, my mentor and dear friend. His intellectual toughness and unrelenting drive to reveal and evaluate the assumptions underlying theoretical and methodological perspectives in the social sciences remains an inspiration. His gracious manner, patience, ready wit, and quick smile are vivid memories.

## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION



HERBERT BLUMER USUALLY WORKED in his University of California, Berkeley, office with the door open. A passerby glancing into it might observe him reading a paper selected from one of two towers of them on opposite ends of his desk, searching through the contents of his four five-drawer file cabinets, or typing on his gray, near-antique Royal typewriter. Even with a cursory scan of the room, though, it was hard to miss the large framed black-and-white picture of George Herbert Mead hanging on the wall over the right side of his desk.<sup>1</sup>

One afternoon while we were in his office, I asked Herb what he saved from his graduate school days at Chicago. He laughed and said, "Almost nothing, except for this." He dug out of his files a paper he wrote for Mead, titled "The Development of the Self." Smiling and pointing to the "A" grade on the cover page, he read aloud Mead's comment, "A most satisfactory statement opening up the field of the world of objects within which the self arises."

Blumer wrestled with issues in Mead's perspective throughout his entire scholarly career. During more than a half century of active scholarship, he engaged in a variety of debates over his interpretations of the relevance of Mead's ideas for developing the theoretical and methodological position of symbolic interactionism.<sup>2</sup>

He was familiar enough with Mead's works to cite relevant page numbers from them in conversation and readily acknowledged the profound impact Mead's thought had on his views of social psychology, sociology, and research methodology. Despite this intellectual debt, however, he remained a thoughtful critic, finding Mead frustratingly sketchy on some important concepts, such as the meaning and significance of the "situation." He also thought Mead's conception and presentation of the "I" and the "Me" were particularly abstruse and logically problematic. On the other hand, as he uncovered major sociological and social psychological themes in Mead's work, Blumer came to appreciate Mead's

remarkable insight into how meanings arise through social interaction, into how the social self is formed, and into how society may be construed in terms of human action. He thought Mead's (1932) notion of "emergence" and the perspective he advocated in *The Philosophy of the Present* had the potential to incite "an amazingly productive revolution" in thinking about the nature of the social world and how to study it. While he championed Mead's ideas throughout his life, Blumer never ceased to probe the limits of their relevance to understanding the full range and complexity of human conduct. He was a steadfast, thoughtfully critical disciple.

Scholarly appreciation for Blumer's expertise in presenting Mead's perspective and for using it to define the essential features of symbolic interaction grew to a dominant position by the time Herb died. Subsequently, symbolic interactionism and Blumer's point of view were assimilated into a plethora of new areas of research interest and theoretical schemes (Fine 1993). Until that time, "Blumer served as an arbitrator for what symbolic interaction 'really' meant" (Fine 1993, 64). Later, Gary Alan Fine avers, consensus on essential features of symbolic interactionism and on Blumer's interpretation of the sociological relevance of Mead's ideas weakened as symbolic interactionism moved into a series of diverse theoretical contexts, including versions of ethnomethodology, literary criticism, and European social theory advanced by other advocates (Fine 1993, 66). Debates on the range of applicability of these ideas became a more prominent feature of the scholarly scene as this trend toward diversity took hold.

Blumer always committed himself fully to such encounters. And, usually, he relished them. But late in his career, he (Blumer 1983) took exception to what he called a particularly "grotesque" interpretation (Lewis and Smith 1980) of Mead's views and a misguided critique of his own position. Alleging a "realist-nominalist" split in Chicago School sociology (1920–1935) and casting Blumer as a "nominalist" and Mead as a "realist," J. David Lewis and Richard L. Smith (1980) provoked Blumer's pointed refutation as well as a clarification of the nature of his association with Mead. With characteristic clarity, Blumer said,

Since the Lewis-Smith contention is a clear challenge to my competency to interpret Mead I find it necessary to say something about my credentials. I was introduced to Mead's thought by Ellsworth Faris, under whom I did my major graduate work and who directed my doctoral dissertation ("Method in Social Psychology"). Faris, to whom I owe a great intellectual indebtedness, was a profound and faithful disciple of Mead. He gave me the basic structure of Mead's thought. With this as a background, I studied under Mead as a regular student and was an auditor in several of his graduate classes. During the later part

of my graduate work I served for several months as Mead's research assistant. Mead was familiar with my doctoral dissertation; I had submitted to him that portion of my dissertation dealing with his thought. Mead attended my doctoral examination (Chaired by Ellsworth Faris) and questioned me. . . . Mead was familiar with my social psychological thought and, like Faris, did not find it to be questionable or wanting. Indeed, shortly after the beginning of Mead's last quarter of instruction at the University of Chicago, when he had to withdraw because of illness, Mead asked me to take over his major course, "Advanced Social Psychology." I agreed to do this. Neither Mead nor Faris ever questioned my satisfactory understanding of Mead's social psychological thought. (Blumer 1983, 137n2)

Though one can find portions relating to Mead's ideas in the majority of Blumer's writings, those focused primarily on Mead (Blumer 1928, 1937a, 1966c, and 1981) deal almost exclusively with the theoretical and methodological aspects of social psychological and sociological themes in Mead's work. As a master's degree candidate at Missouri under Charles Ellwood's direction, Herb studied pragmatist thought (especially Mead and Dewey). However, as suggested by the following extract, the record of his writing on Mead begins with his dissertation at Chicago:

The consideration of Mead's views on social psychology should be prefaced by a recognition that they represent a philosophical approach. With an original Hegelian bent—early transformed into a pragmatic interest—Mead's entrance into the field has been through the gateway of the "mind-body" problem. Like his pragmatic compatriots his treatment of this elusive puzzle has turned attention to the instrumental role of the "psychical"; to the significance of cooperative activity in its functioning; and to the emergence of a self and the world from this same nexus. Thus, a theory starting from an impulse to cut the post-renaissance Gordian knot of philosophy ends in being an interpretation of human conduct. (Blumer 1928, 202)

This basic interpretation of Mead's overarching points of concern can be found throughout this manuscript as well as in Blumer's last pieces on Mead (Blumer 1981, 1983). Blumer's interest in Mead's work increased in proportion to the extent to which he discerned its relevance to the empirical study of action and social life. His theoretical and methodological preoccupation with building a



viable social science that respected the emergent nature of social reality was wholly compatible with pragmatism's assumptions about the emergent character of social life and the significance of perspective in defining reality. Mead and other pragmatists, as he observes, sought to move from a description of the code-determinative relationship between mind and body to describing the interdependence between mind and environment and, subsequently, to presenting a picture of the emergence of the self in a social world. They sought nothing less than to define the character of social reality. Blumer used Mead's processual approach to the human condition to compose an enduring framework for analysis of human conduct in a perpetually situated and ever emergent social context. He captured the essence of this image of reality less than a decade later when he (Blumer 1937a) coined the term "symbolic interaction" and introduced symbolic interactionism as a social psychological perspective.

The present volume, wherein Blumer addresses "George Herbert Mead and Human Conduct," showcases the central emphasis in symbolic interactionism on examining human action and interaction as formative and emergent processes. Blumer's chapters on objects, the self and individual, and social acts complement his published work on these subjects. Within these statements Herb sometimes offers additional examples of phenomena he's written about, as well as novel elaborations, syntheses, and summaries of major points. His description (Blumer, this text, 69) of the importance of Mead's view of action, for example, succinctly addresses points he covers in other works (especially Blumer 1966b, 1981):

"Action" pervades Mead's entire scheme of analysis. Society is seen in terms of action—the fitting together of lines of action of individual members. Social structure is seen as differentiated and complementary patterns of activity. The association of members of society is treated in terms of *interaction*. The individual member is seen as an acting organism. The self is depicted as a process of activity in which the individual is engaged in making indications to himself or herself. Objects—all things of which the individual is aware—are depicted as plans or designs of action.

Blumer wrote this volume on Mead to call attention to "extensive and profound" implications of Mead's perspective for sociology, social psychology, and psychology. Because Herb pursued this aim throughout his career, readers familiar with Blumer's examinations (1928, 1937a, 1981, 1986) of Mead's views will undoubtedly recognize themes and topics and occasionally notice phrasing and illustrative examples of concepts they have seen before. However, in addition to

the sorts of summary statements just mentioned, one will also find in the text heretofore unseen commentary on, for example, the process of definition, prospective and unconscious acts, the gesture, Mead's "generalized other," and the interdependence of the actor and the group.

Focusing on human conduct, Blumer articulates symbolic interactionism's fundamental notion that the self, individual and collective action, interaction, the social construction of meaning, social control, society, as well as social structure and change, "have their sources in" and are "lodged in" the emergent process of human association. This association is profoundly "social" in that it is accomplished through symbolic interaction. Attending astutely to Mead's views of social conduct as built on linguistically enabled reflectivity, purposive activity, and emergent symbolic interaction, Blumer sought to give new direction to the social sciences.

Blumer reasserted the importance of the central role that humans (as reflective, purposive, interacting agents) play in creating, sustaining, and changing the social world. He articulated this theory at a time when the leading theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches in the social sciences portrayed human conduct either as the product of structures or forces external to the individual (such as culture, social structure, or laws of social-cultural evolution) or as the outcomes of inner drives, dispositions, psychic states, or mental structures. He found in Mead an image of social conduct capturing the essential self-reflexive and self-determinative character of human agency.

Stressing the fact that being "social" involves more than merely accumulating knowledge or experience, Blumer focuses on Mead's view of action. Herb calls attention to the effects of the complex interdependence of self and society and reminds us that humans have no "original and independent existence" apart from others, that humans become social only through contact with others.<sup>3</sup> Becoming social is contingent upon the human capacity to act mindfully of others. As Mead and Blumer assert, it is this capacity to become an "object unto oneself" that allows people to make meaningful indications to themselves. Thus, the capacity for self-indication may be considered the most important of all social processes because it allows symbolic interaction with others and ourselves. Likewise, self-indication must occur for us to create objects that make up our world in meaningful, purposive, adjustive terms. This foundational process epitomizes social life and enables the ongoing construction of individual and collective action. It is the essential feature of social reality.

Blumer's interpretation of Mead also highlights the sociological point that social reality is comprised of acts, interchanges, and associations, all of which are predicated on social interaction. While of varying sizes, duration, and complexities,

these acts are social in character and may comprise social structures or developmental contexts within which other acts occur. These larger act-constituted contexts are formed through individual and collective acts tied together (historically, vertically, horizontally) in reflection, which may or may not be an object of consideration itself, by people doing things and making indications to themselves and others. Blumer's image of society and group life as symbolic interaction is developed vividly in this manuscript.

Blumer's formulation represents a "recursive" model of social structure (Maines and Morrione 1990, 2001). Instead of alleging that human behavior is a product of abstract forces, Mead and Blumer observe that people's conduct, including broader complexes of acts comprising social structures, is formed through processes of symbolic interaction, wherein people engaged in self-indication take objects into account and, individually and collectively, devise ways of handling situations they confront. The related notions of adaptability and flexibility, which are so central to human action from Mead and Blumer's standpoint, result from people monitoring emergent situations and making assessments and adjustments throughout the formation of acts related to these situations. As well, in the process of making self-indications, people arrive at situational definitions by reflecting on their past experiences, considering varied aspects of their present settings, and anticipating futures; these elements are synthesized into emerging instances of group life.

Blumer also draws from Mead's analysis of human conduct the notion that changes in direction or intensification of people's impulses and commitments occur as they build acts in emerging situations. Herb urges social scientists to pay attention to things people note as they develop "lines of action" as well as to how people deal with the things they note in the course of the ongoing act. He appreciated clearly this empirical focus in Mead and, thus, insists on studying the world as it appears from the point of view of the actor.

Blumer also found reason in Mead's pragmatism to examine the obdurate character of social reality, the world that "acts back" on the actor.<sup>4</sup> Some interpreters (Huber 1973a) of Blumer's image of social reality and its relation to Mead's work allege a "subjectivist" bias in his conception of social action. For this implicitly positivist claim to hold up, however, one would have to ignore Blumer's acknowledging the significance of the obdurate character of social reality. As objects themselves, acting within a world of objects, people inevitably test and assess their images, objectives, and activities amid the obdurate social and physical aspects of situations (Morrione and Farberman 1981a; Morrione 1985, 1988; Prus 1996). While limiting people's frames of reference and options in

certain respects, encounters with resistance in the world do not negate the fact that a self-monitoring, defining, and interpreting process guides action.

Even unwitting acts involve people making indications and assigning meanings to objects encountered. The unnoted character of much of everyday life, by dint of its ever-present character, prompts Herb to consider it even more closely. Bringing this subject into sharper focus with a reference to the relationship between social structure and emerging action, Blumer reminds us that nonobvious aspects of reality that influence acts may be revealed by attempting to locate acts within larger acts and situations.<sup>5</sup> Herb's advice about where to look for clues about out-of-awareness influences on action reflects his desire to ground the analysis of individual and collective action in empirical situations. Examining the formative character of the act and its relation to these larger contextual situations would show that "the human act is open and vulnerable at different points in its career . . . [and that] the individual may judge his act, check it, abandon it, or reorient it at such points."<sup>6</sup>

The relative absence in Mead's work of empirical descriptions of how acts emerge in ongoing social life, however, prompts Blumer to find fault with Mead's (1938) depiction of the act (see also Blumer 1981, 167–68). Blumer's treatment of group life in the last chapter of this manuscript presents an image of the formative character of the act as predicated on the distinctly human ability to "stand over against a field of action."

Blumer uses imagery that evokes visions of fluidity and process when describing "group life." Saying that group life "has an organized character, but that character exists in it not before it or after it" emphasizes a structure-as-process perspective consistent with Mead's view of action. Structures emerge through the process of constituting and sustaining "joint action" (Blumer 1986, 16–20). By "fitting their lines of action together," people create group life.<sup>7</sup> For Blumer, then, joint action "constitutes both the process and the content of human group life." He further distills from this idea Mead's basic point that individual and collective acts are processes of ongoing "adjustment" and argues that symbolic interaction is the process by which this alignment occurs. This primal social process allows actors to construct and manage their ongoing adjustment with an intersubjective, shared, obdurate social reality (Prus 1996).

The notion that social life exists as an ongoing process permeates Blumer's treatise on Mead. Interaction takes the form of "a running sequence of indications, interpretations, devising of response, and execution of response, with the overt response serving as an indication to initiate anew the sequence in the reverse direction and so on" (Blumer, this text, 29; Morrione 1975). This theme also emerges in his depiction of individual action as consistent with Mead's views. He

says, "[H]uman beings are engaged in a running sequence of making notations to themselves of details of their action, of aspects of their own condition, of features of their situation, and of prospects of their action as they project it forward in their imagination in terms of what they might do" (Blumer, this text, 75). People's images of these notations constitute the subjective aspect of what Blumer calls a "field of action," in which people build up acts to fit others' acts by taking the standpoint of those others, making self-indications, and engaging in minded adjustment. Interaction, thus, is an ongoing accomplishment that results from people's entering into an interpretive process and using aspects of each other's emerging acts to build their own acts while devising responses and working through situations (Morrione 1975, 1985). This process of adjustment marks all interpersonal interactions as well as all instances of the ongoing structuring and restructuring of large-scale collective events and organizational routines, including the broadest realms of industrialization and societal change (Blumer 1990; Morrione 1999).

Blumer's concluding analysis of Mead's position makes it clear that action and interaction involve people's coming to terms with "objects." These arrangements of objects (as people's definitions of situations) comprise the "operating environments" around which activity is organized. Situations and objects within them may take on relatively stable meanings, and much of life may be seen as routine and taken for granted. Nevertheless, the situation-object meaning, as a function of its emergent relation, is never completely set in advance. Actors may attach a wide array of meanings to any objects they might reference as they reflect on or otherwise engage those objects. Thus, for example, by invoking distant memories, attending to something happening in one's immediate setting, or imagining things that might happen in the future, people may alter substantially the meaning of any object under consideration. Following Mead's essential pragmatist vision and recognizing the indeterminate quality of social life, Blumer asks how people shape individual and collective acts (and thereby produce, sustain, and change social structures of all sizes and complexities). And, acknowledging Mead's contributions to understanding human conduct, social structures, and society in terms of self-reflexivity and individual and collective acts, Blumer envisions social phenomena as ongoing accomplishments, as social things in the making.

While the present volume focuses mostly on Mead's contributions to understanding symbolic interaction and its relation to individual and social acts, elsewhere Blumer (1986) extended the methodological implications of Mead's approach to the study of human group life in ways that Mead would have found intensely interesting. Indeed, though a philosopher, Mead was a pragmatist and

did not shrink from empirical examinations of social process. Herbert Blumer also appears to have appreciated thoroughly Mead's view of human conduct and community life as something in the making.

In this volume, in the first chapter (aptly titled "Introduction"), Blumer defines his primary goal as demonstrating the relevance of Mead's pragmatist perspective to understanding social life. He then delineates the essential features of symbolic interaction in chapter 2, "George Herbert Mead and Human Conduct." Here Herb develops the notion that symbolic interaction occurs through the use of significant symbols—or gestures, the meanings of which are shared. Using this idea to orient his analysis of the nature of meaning, human learning, group life, and joint action, he not only illustrates the relevance of Mead's perspective to understanding human conduct, but also critiques perspectives in the social sciences that cast human actors in passive roles. Blumer concludes this defining chapter with a well-focused discussion about the reasons symbolic interaction is best envisioned as a "generative and formative agency in its own right." While setting the stage for further examination of processes central to symbolic interaction in the chapters to follow, he leaves little doubt that Mead's views are vitally relevant for understanding human conduct and ongoing community life.

In the third chapter, titled simply "Objects," Blumer untangles a snarled set of issues pertaining to action, the creation of meaning, and the character of social reality. Building on Mead's notion that objects are things that people indicate or point out to themselves and others, as well as plans of action oriented toward these things or others, Herb addresses the question of how meanings are generated in human association and group life. His comments in this chapter about how objects emerge in interaction invite closer examination of social processes involved in generating new meanings and in maintaining existing meanings of the things (including notions of self and others) to which people attend as they encounter life's ongoing stream of situations.

In chapter 4, "The Self," Blumer takes on the twofold task of (a) explaining Mead's view of how the self is formed and (b) analyzing the significance of what it means for the self to be an object to itself. Scrutinizing Mead's rendition of the evolution of the self, Herb (Blumer, this text, 62) underscores the importance of taking the role of a "generalized other," whereby "the individual is able to introduce organization into his or her world of operation, to develop consistency of action in diverse situations, to form lines of unity in personal makeup, and to offset divergent demands of concrete situations." Blumer concludes this chapter with a portrait of the self possessing the distinctly human ability to indicate things to itself and, therefore, to create a "private world" of dialogue with itself. He observes that the ability to interact with oneself is the most significant dimension

of human existence. It allows people to create a wide array of deliberative, active, adjustive roles in shaping their conduct.

Invoking Mead's ideas to explain how individual action and group life take form, in chapters 5 ("The Individual Act") and 6 ("The Social Act"), Blumer stresses theoretical implications of empirically observable aspects of human conduct. Thus his discussions of acts as matters that (a) vary tremendously in duration, complexity, and novelty, (b) are contextualized within larger acts, (c) are open to redirection, and (d) may be thought of as having varied careers all invite the researcher to apply Mead's pragmatist views to everyday life. Blumer emphasizes the point that the act, the self, the ongoing situation, and general "fields of action" all imply images of projected futures to be handled in some fashion as people confront social life.

Regardless of whether people succeed or fail in addressing situations as they desire, or whether they achieve what others might think they could or should, people inevitably are involved in constructing individual and collective acts as they strive to deal with situations in meaningful terms.

In the last chapter, "The Social Act," and following central themes in Mead's inquiry into the character of social reality, Blumer approaches organization and social structure in terms of ongoing social action. In a similar vein, Herb raises questions about how social acts are coordinated, how they change or persist, and how they are tied to individual acts. Like others before it, Blumer's last line of inquiry forms a particularly strong bridge from Mead's philosophically aligned analysis of self, action, human conduct, and social organization to Herb's own empirically oriented sociology and social psychology. In my judgment, this bridge will stand the weight of considerable future traffic.

An appendix to this manuscript contains correspondence between Blumer and David L. Miller and a variety of papers and notes that shed additional light on Blumer's depiction of social life and his interpretation of Mead's perspective.

## Notes

1. The picture of George Herbert Mead hanging in Blumer's office looked much like an enlarged obverse of the picture found in the printed pamphlet of comments made by Edward Scribner Ames, John Dewey, and James H. Tufts (April 30, 1931) at Mead's memorial service.

2. While much of Blumer's work represents a debate with mainstream (positivist) social science, there are three more personalized sets of debates in which Blumer and others engaged with respect to the nature of Meadian social thought and symbolic interactionism.

The first of these began with Blumer's publishing a paper titled "The Sociological Implications of the Thought of George Herbert Mead" (1966b), which was challenged by Robert F. Bales in his 1966 "Comment on Herbert Blumer's Paper." Blumer's "Reply" to Bales (1966c)

followed. See also Gregory P. Stone and Harvey A. Farberman (1967), "Further Comment on the Blumer-Bales Dialogue Concerning the Implications of the Thought of George Herbert Mead."

A second debate was prompted by Joan Huber's (1973a) "Symbolic Interactionism as a Pragmatic Perspective: The Bias of Emergent Theory." For Blumer's reply, see "A Note on Symbolic Interactionism" (1973). Following Huber's rejoinder, "Who Will Scrutinize the Scrutinizers?" (1973b), the debate widened somewhat, with Raymond Schmitt's 1974 "SI and Emergent Theory: A Reexamination"; Gregory P. Stone and others' "On Methodology and Craftsmanship in the Criticism of Sociological Perspectives" (1974); and Huber's reply to Schmitt, Stone, and others, "The Emergency of Emergent Theory" (1974).

The third set of confrontations involved distortions of Mead and Blumer's views as presented in J. David Lewis and Richard L. Smith's *American Sociology and Pragmatism: Mead, Chicago Sociology and Symbolic Interaction* (1980). See Blumer's response, "Going Astray with a Logical Scheme" (1983) and Lewis and Smith's rejoinder, "Putting the Symbol in Symbolic Interactionism" (*Symbolic Interaction* 1983, 6:165–174). The substance of this debate, centering on Lewis and Smith's miscasting Blumer as a "nominalist" and Mead as a "realist," is discussed in the Blumer–Miller correspondence contained in the appendix to this volume. See also James Campbell's "Mead and Pragmatism" (1983) for a telling critique of Lewis and Smith's position.

3. In addition to his more direct indebtedness to Mead, Blumer also benefited from Ellsworth Faris's interpretation of the process of becoming social and especially noted the importance of acknowledging both conscious and unconscious processes occurring in the course of emerging self. Herb accepted Faris's (1926; 1937, 73–83) explanation of "slow unwitting imitation" as a part of the process along with (not necessarily as a precursor to) role-taking.

4. For a more sustained consideration of Blumer's notions of obdurate reality, see Blumer (1986) and Prus and Dawson (1996).

5. Readers familiar with Schutz (1962, 1964) will recognize many affinities between Schutz's materials and those of Blumer, with respect to both notions of the elements of social life that people commonly "take-for-granted" and other aspects of human social realities.

6. Blumer (1986) also addresses the matter of variable, process-related object meanings in his considerations of the act and joint acts.

7. Somewhat similar positions may be found in the ethnomethodological (e.g., Garfinkel 1967; Mehan and Wood 1975) considerations of order-producing "accounting" practices, as well as interactionists' (Maines and Charlton 1985; Prus 1999) interest in processes that establish, maintain, and change "negotiated orders."



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MY AIM IN THE PRESENT WORK is to present the thought of George Herbert Mead in terms of its significance for the study of human conduct. The treatment, accordingly, will be oriented to the concerns of sociology, social psychology, and psychology. The implications of Mead's views for these three disciplines are extensive and profound. Scholars in these disciplines, even though paying homage to Mead's name, in my judgment do not have a clear and proper understanding of his thought and thus fail to perceive its profound import for their tasks. His views set a serious challenge to prevailing premises in these disciplines as they relate to the nature of man, society, and conduct.

Some preliminary observations are in order. Mead was basically a philosopher, interested in the central problems of that discipline. He was concerned with such cardinal problems as the nature of the world in relation to man and the natures of mind and human understanding. He was thoroughly familiar with the range of philosophical thought on such problems—a familiarity that extends far beyond what is disclosed in his publications. He was abreast of the scientific thinking of his time, from physics through biology to psychology and the social sciences. He had an extraordinary ability to extract and order the essential principles embodied in such philosophical and scientific thought and bring them to bear on his central problems. Clearly outstanding was his gift of originality—a gift that established him as one of the great thinkers of modern times. Very important, although little noted by his commentators, was his continual reflection on everyday life around him; he was constantly using observations of his own experience and of the conduct of others to test and sharpen his ideas on such typical problems as the nature of mind, communication, action, and the self. This naturalistic bent imparts to his views, once their meaning is grasped, a down-to-earth character that is paradoxically both very revealing and very obvious.

No attempt will be made in this book to trace the genesis of Mead's thought or to link it to the views of such figures as Kant, Hume, Leibniz, Hegel, Adam Smith, Peirce, William James, Royce, Wundt, Bergson, Dewey, and Whitehead, to whom he acknowledged intellectual indebtedness. A study of such genesis,

especially the profound influence on Mead of Darwinian evolution and of the pragmatic spirit of American frontier life, would be very revealing and rewarding—but such an undertaking falls outside our present concern. Nor shall we deal with Mead's treatment of epistemological and metaphysical problems, the core of his philosophical work, as penetrating, significant, and vital as it may be. We cannot avoid, of course, touching on matters that Mead wove into his philosophical perspective. But our interest in considering them will not be their contribution to the solution of philosophical problems. Instead, our interest will be the significance and empirical validity of Mead's treatment of these matters as they pertain to the nature of human society and action. Further, we shall not consider the interesting applications of Mead's thought as it extends into such diverse fields as aesthetics, ethics, neurology, psychiatry, law, and social reform. Such applications have been made with illuminating and rewarding results, and indeed the fuller possibilities of fruitful use in such fields constitute an inviting challenge. To enter into this line of treatment would carry the present work far beyond its prescribed scope. Our concern with Mead's thought is with those central parts that are of fundamental significance for social and psychological science—such matters as the nature of human association, social interaction, communication, the human being as an acting organism, and the nature of human action.

In the interest of clarity and brevity, I will present Mead's views without resorting to the use of quotations from his published works, with possibly one or two exceptions. Much of Mead's own exposition, particularly his central exposition, is unfortunately not easy to understand. Further, it is frequently presented in skeletal and unfinished form and, in addition, oriented to philosophical problems in such a way that their import for social and psychological science is obscured. For these various reasons, I am led to present in my own expository form his views as they relate to our matters of concern. In doing so, there are occasions when I have to go beyond what Mead has written, beyond what he has said as recorded in the notes of his students, and indeed beyond what he had occasion to say in my many intimate conversations with him.<sup>1</sup> I have tried to clarify much that he did not make clear and to fill out important areas that were implicit in his scheme of thought but that he had no occasion to develop orally or in writing. There are, accordingly, parts of the exposition in this essay that are my own elaboration, but they have been made faithfully inside of the scheme of his thought and are congruent with it. It is unfortunate, from one point of view, that in developing his scheme of thought, which is of such profound significance to sociology and psychology, Mead was centrally preoccupied with philosophical problems. His own publications and those based on his class lectures are heavily

imprinted with this slant. One may well wish, selfishly, that he had oriented his treatment more explicitly and systematically in the direction of sociological and psychological concerns. I have sought to do this in my own presentation.

An additional preliminary observation should be made, namely, that no one of Mead's cardinal ideas can be understood adequately except in relation to his other central ideas. Consequently, in the presentation of his scheme, we shall return from time to time to some central conceptions and further clarify them in the light of the treatment of other of his conceptions. The readers of the following exposition should defer forming fixed judgments of any part of Mead's scheme until they have grasped the meaning of his scheme in its entirety.

The plan of treatment in the present work falls into three parts: a presentation of Mead's scheme, a consideration of a number of its more important implications for the current study of human conduct, and a consideration of the more significant and recurrent criticisms of his social psychological thought.

## Notes

1. The writer studied under Mead, wrote his doctoral dissertation under Mead's guidance, performed research under his direction, assisted him in some of his work, and at his request took over the instruction of his classes in social psychology during the period of illness that preceded his death.

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ALL SOCIOLOGISTS ACKNOWLEDGE that human societies consist of human beings engaged in interaction. Indeed, this is the most frequent way in which they define a human society. Yet despite this acknowledgment, they usually take interaction for granted and pay no attention to a need to understand its character. We can easily note this in the typical ways in which sociological concepts are applied to group life or to the behavior of individuals in group life. The bulk of sociological concepts, certainly the more significant ones, convert social interaction into a mere medium for the expression of factors brought into it and that lie logically outside of it. Thus such typical factors as norms, values, roles, status positions, customs, cultural imperatives, and institutional requirements are treated as working through the interaction of human beings to shape their behavior. In this customary type of treatment, social interaction is given no character in its own right; instead, it becomes merely a forum for the play of factors that enter into it and work their way through it. The behavior of people in interaction is accounted for in such terms as adhering to norms and values, carrying out the requirements of the roles they are playing, living up to the demands of their status positions, or conforming to cultural definitions. To the extent to which their behavior is explained in such terms, their interaction is merely an operating medium through which the given determinative factors come to expression. Social interaction is given exactly the same neutral status by schemes that seek to explain human conduct in terms of psychological elements, such as organic drives, wishes, attitudes, unconscious dispositions, or other types of motives. In the case of such schemes, social interaction is merely an arena in which such psychological factors work their way out to realization in the shaping of conduct. In the case of both such sociological and psychological explanation of human conduct, or in the case of some combination of the two, social interaction is typically assigned to the position of a mere field of operations. Logically, it is given no recognition as having a distinctive character in its own right—a character that may limit, transform, or nullify the sociological or psychological factors used to explain the behavior of people involved in interaction.

The position of Mead is contrary to these conventional ways in which social interaction is viewed and handled. Mead has taken social interaction very seriously and has sought through careful analysis to identify its distinctive and highly important character. He recognizes that group life *is* social interaction, that is to say, the fitting together by individuals of their respective lines of ongoing activity. The process of social interaction is not seen by Mead as a mere implementation, so to speak, of alleged determining factors that people bring with them as they enter into association with each other. Instead, it has a character of its own that vitally affects the operation of such factors. Because of the importance Mead assigns to the process of social interaction, it is important to make clear how he has analyzed the process.

Social interaction is usually conceived simply as a process of interstimulation and response in which the action of one organism serves as a stimulus to a response by the other organism, and this response serves in turn as a stimulus to the first organism. For Mead, this view is too superficial to bring out the essential nature of social interaction. It does not note the proper relations of the organisms to each other and overlooks the continuing state of interconnection between their respective actions. Interaction is not an interlinking of completed acts, in the sense that one organism engages in an action that the other organism perceives and responds to by an action of its own, with this latter action being, in turn, a stimulus to the first organism. To seize the nearest analogy I can think of, it is not to be likened to a game of chess, in which one player makes a move and then waits for a responding move by his or her opponent before undertaking another move. Instead, organisms in interaction are observing each other's ongoing activity, with each using portions of the developing action of the other as pivots for the redirection of his or her own action. These portions of the developing or unfinished action of each organism constitute what Mead terms "gestures." Interaction takes place between gestures and not between acts. The key to Mead's analysis is this concept of gesture. The following discussion will clarify its meaning and show its importance for understanding social interaction.

Mead recognizes two forms of social interaction, which he designates as the "conversation of gestures" and the "use of the significant symbol," a significant symbol being a gesture whose meaning is perceived. These two forms of interaction correspond respectively to interaction on the subhuman and human levels, although both forms occur in human social groups. We shall explain them, as did Mead, by referring to interaction as it takes place between two organisms.

Mead's favorite illustration of the "conversation of gestures" was the maneuvering of two dogs before beginning a fight, represented by such movements as advancing toward each other, circling each other, approaching and withdrawing,

walking tensely, bristling their hair, growling, baring teeth, and snarling. In the intricate interplay between the animals, each such movement on the part of one serves as a stimulus to call forth an answering response from the other, with the response serving in turn as a stimulus to action by the former. These movements, such as a sudden advance, a circling movement, or a baring of teeth, are the pivotal points in the interplay of the animals. They constitute gestures.

A gesture has several important features. First, it is a truncated part of a somewhat larger act still to come, and it stands for or foreshadows the remainder of this larger act; for example, the beginning of the precipitous advance by one dog foreshadows the remainder of this likely rush, and baring the teeth represents a preparation for sinking them into flesh. In being a part of the ongoing action, the gesture embodies, so to speak, the character of the immediate action that is to follow it. As a stimulus, consequently, the gesture is not a completed action or end in itself but rather a foreshadowing of what is to come. Its stimulatory quality does not lie in its physiological movement but in its implication of forthcoming action; for example, it is not the contraction of the upper lip and resulting display of fangs that gives the baring of teeth its character as a stimulus to the other dog but, instead, what the baring of teeth portends in the way of following action. The gesture, accordingly, is that beginning portion of an ongoing action that stands for a part of that action still to come; the response to the gesture is not made to what is immediately given in the present but rather to what lies ahead.

Second, a gesture necessarily presupposes response on the part of another organism. The growling of a dog, physically alone by itself, is obviously not a gesture; it is only a gesture when perceived by another organism whose action is affected by it. A gesture necessarily implicates others, serving to engage, evoke, and direct their actions. Gestures are what bring organisms together in an acting relationship. They are the means by which the ongoing actions of the separate organisms come to be adjusted or fitted to each other. Metaphorically, they constitute the building blocks of social interaction. More accurately, they are the pivots for the redirection of activity of organisms in association with each other.

Now let me turn to the distinction Mead draws between "conversation of gestures" and the "use of the significant symbol." In the "conversation of gestures," the organisms in interaction respond to each other's gestures without identifying the meaning of the gestures. Each organism responds unreflectively to the gesture of the other with an action already organized for release; the response is not preceded by, or based on, an interpretation of the gesture. The rapid approach of a dog or the baring of its teeth evokes a response on the part of another dog without the latter having to indicate to itself that the gesture signifies an incipient



attack. A parallel among human beings is illustrated by a boxer who “instinctively” reacts to ward off a punch by an opponent; it is not necessary that the boxer indicate to himself the danger of the oncoming punch in order to make a protective response. In these instances, the gestures are responded to in terms of what they foreshadow, yet the responding organism does not detect or indicate to itself this foreshadowed behavior. The gesture refers to the fact that the remainder of the act is not “picked out” by the responding organism and made the basis of its response. Instead, as Mead declares, the “meaning” of the gesture is implicit, or hidden to the responding organism. The boxer makes the appropriate protective response to the oncoming blow before the blow arrives, without having to indicate to himself the prospective danger of the blow; similarly, the dog adopts a defensive posture in the face of the incipient lunge of the other dog before experiencing the impact of the other’s body, and the dog does this without indicating to itself the significance of the incipient lunge. For Mead, this is characteristic of interaction in the form of a “conversation of gestures.” The participants respond to each other’s gestures effectively, even though unreflectively; their responses are evoked or released and not preceded by an awareness of the implicit meaning of the gestures.

In contrast to interaction in the form of a “conversation of gestures,” the “use of significant symbols” is interaction in which the organism does not respond to the gesture on the basis of its mere presentation but instead interprets the gesture and responds to it on the basis of the interpretation. Thus, a human being confronted by a person shaking a fist interprets that gesture to signify, as the case may be, that the person is angry, or bluffing, or indicating displeasure, or playfully feigning an attack. The response is based on the way the gesture, in this case the shaking of the fist, is interpreted. Instead of responding automatically to the gesture with a fixed behavior locked to the gesture, the person has to identify or pick out what the gesture signifies in the way of forthcoming behavior. The response is made on the basis of this prospective behavior.

Several things need to be immediately noted in the case of interaction that takes the form of interpreting the gestures of one another. The interpretation of the gesture, that is, determining its meaning, frees the human being from making a fixed response to the presentation of the gesture. Since the gesture may be (not necessarily will be) interpreted or defined in more than one way, the response made to it may obviously vary. This point may be pushed still further: Not only may the gesture be defined variously, but in defining it in any given way, the individual is in a position to figure out how to act in response to it. Thus, in interpreting the shaking of the fist as a sign of an angry person who is ready to launch an aggressive attack, one is not necessarily led into a single response, such

as that of flight. Instead, one may devise one of several responses, such as trying to bluff or mollify the perceived attacker, being contrite, "joking the matter away," or provoking the "attacker" to greater anger. Identification of the meaning of the gesture lays a basis for devising various kinds of responses to it. This point highlights the fundamental difference between interaction using significant symbols and interaction in the form of a conversation of gestures. Interpretation inserts, so to speak, a new stage between the gesture and the response to it—a stage that radically transforms the nature of interaction. Each of the two forms of interaction should be seen as having a different character, as operating differently, and as calling for a different kind of analysis. To treat the conversation of gestures as if it were interpretive, as is frequently done in the explanation of animal behavior, is to read into it an unwarranted character. Conversely, to treat the use of the significant symbol as if it were devoid of interpretation, as is done extensively by many theories of human conduct, distorts this type of social interaction and strips it of its central character.

Gestures may take the widest variety of forms. On the level of "conversation of gestures," the gesture is almost certain to take the form of a physical movement or sound, such as a shift in body posture, a lunge, a facial or larger body movement, a snarl, a "call," or a vocal utterance. Such movements or utterances become significant gestures or symbols when they are responded to on the basis of their meaning. The great majority of significant symbols are in the form of verbal gestures—words, phrases, and sentences. But it should be apparent that significant gestures may appear in many diverse forms. They may consist of body movements such as puckering lips, arching eyebrows, darting eyes, movements of fingers and hands, and shuffling feet. Also, to jump over into the vast area of interaction between groups, significant gestures may appear in the forms of public pronouncements, declarations of war, announcements of policy, grievances or petitions, law suits, and political programs. All such things are significant gestures or symbols if they are interpreted to stand for forthcoming lines of action. Accordingly, significant gestures or symbols in Mead's use of the terms should not be thought of as confined to the physical gestures that take place in face-to-face interaction, nor as limited to the conventional units of the spoken language, such as words, nor as contained in some kind of stock of "group symbols" brought to bear on what is taking place in a group's life. Instead, it is important to understand clearly that a significant gesture or symbol is part of a line of action that is picked out and perceived to point to a larger act of which it is a part. The act of which the significant gesture is a part may be as simple as bidding someone farewell, or it may be a very complex act on the part of a large group, such as a nation carrying on a war. And what appears as a significant gesture, or the meaningfully

perceived part of the act, may be something small, even minute, or something large and complex. The significant symbol belongs to the act; it should not be lodged in some array of so-called group symbols or meanings existing apart from the act.

Henceforth, we shall use the label "symbolic interaction" to refer to the type of interaction that makes use of significant gestures or symbols. We shall use the term "nonsymbolic interaction" to cover the type of interaction Mead treats as the "conversation of gestures." Several matters pertaining to the distinction between these two types of interaction may be inserted at this point. First, one should keep in mind the fact that nonsymbolic interaction, while typical of animal societies, also takes place in the association of human beings. In their contact with each other, human beings may become involved in forms of interaction in which they respond directly to each other's gestures and not to the meaning of the gestures. Human beings may not be aware of either the gestures of others or of their own responses to them. This happens frequently in responding unwittingly to tones of the voice, bodily posture, facial expressions, or vivacity of bodily movements. Such unwitting forms of interaction pervade human association, imparting a vast, unconscious dimension to group life. While this unconscious form of interaction has been scarcely noted by scholars, much less studied, there can be no question as to its fundamental importance. It is probably basic in the formation and maintenance of collective emotional states of human groups, such as enthusiasms, apathy, insecurity, confidence, and excitement, and becomes pronounced in the case of "crowd" behavior. It is important also in shaping the formation of feelings and attitudes, as in the case of responses to oratory, demagoguery, and drama. These observations are especially in order in view of the unwarranted accusation by some of Mead's critics to the effect that he saw human beings as solely rational creatures and human societies as solely rational organizations. While Mead was, appropriately, preoccupied predominantly with symbolic interaction, his scheme clearly respected and made place for nonsymbolic interaction in human society.

Second, it should be borne in mind that nonsymbolic interaction is not restricted to human behavior. It may employ or operate with learned gestures and responses, and this is true in the case of animals and human beings alike; it is pronouncedly so in the cases of gestures and modes of response acquired through the mechanism of the "conditioning of responses." This mechanism, in its precise and legitimate sense, is *not* a means whereby interpretation is made of conditioned stimuli, since an established response is merely evoked or released by the new stimulus. Just because new modes of response are "learned" through nonsymbolic interaction, one cannot assume either that the gestures or the responses thereby

acquire "meaning" for the organism or that the organism *interprets* the gestures or new stimuli.

Third, in line with this discussion, it should be noted that the process of "learning" through nonsymbolic interaction is very different indeed from the process of learning through symbolic interaction. To apply the explanation appropriate for one to the other is a source of distortion and misunderstanding.

The distinction Mead draws between the conversation of gestures and the use of the significant symbol is merely a gateway to his further analysis of symbolic interaction. This further analysis permitted him to identify the nature of meaning and communication and to put his finger on what is central in social interaction between human beings. Before we trace through Mead's more exacting analysis, it is well to remind the reader that human group life consists of interaction between human beings. Regardless of where we look, whether in the home, neighborhood, market place, courts, churches, schools, parliamentary assemblies, factories, business offices, banks, stores, playgrounds, and the meeting of friends, we see people acting toward one another and responding to one another. There is no area of group life, however small or large, in which this is not true. Human group life is necessarily social interaction. In some situations the interaction may be between only two persons; in others it may be between numbers of people assembled together. It may be between a single individual and an aggregate of people, as in the case of a lecturer and his audience. It may be between organized groups, as in the case of teams, agencies, associations, institutions, parties, and nations. It may be between officials and leaders authorized to act on behalf of groups they represent. The interaction may be direct, as in personal confrontation, or it may be markedly indirect, as in the case of a large labor union and an association of manufacturers working through intermediaries on widely scattered fronts, for example. No sane observer looking empirically at human group life can deny that it is made up of the activity of people engaged in interaction. Interaction is the basic and pervading feature.

Now, with an appreciation of the fact that social interaction is the stuff of group life, we wish to analyze symbolic interaction, following Mead's scheme of treatment. We shall examine it in its simplest form, namely, interaction between two individuals. Such a simple form of interaction is the prototype of human social interaction in general. Its analysis will allow us to identify the crucial features of symbolic interaction.

The picture with which we start is that of two human beings engaging in interaction with each other, in which each is interpreting the gestures of the other—or, as we may say, interpreting each other's remarks and actions. Simple instances of such interaction are represented by the following: an armed robber's

command to his victim to put up his hands; a mother's request to her daughter to begin to study her lesson; a teacher's explanation to a student of the meaning of a statement; a policeman's threat to an unruly citizen to be quiet or else be arrested; and a shopper's tender of money to a sales clerk. In each of these instances, we presume some response by the person addressed, such as the victim obeying the robber's command, the daughter engaging in further procrastination, the student asking for further clarification, the citizen protesting, and the sales clerk accepting the money and handing over the purchased article. These responses, in turn, could call for further activity on the part of the first person in each relationship. In accordance with Mead's scheme of analysis, we pick out in each instance two basic factors—an *indication*, made by the first person to the second person, and an *interpretation* of the indication, made by the second person. For example, the robber's command, "Put up your hands," indicates the type of action the victim is called on to perform; confronted with this command, the victim has to interpret the command (i.e., ascertain its meaning) in order to respond effectively. "Indication" and "interpretation" are the two basic components of symbolic interaction. Indication is the presentation of a meaningful gesture; interpretation is the determination of the meaning of the gesture.

We may now ask, what is the "meaning" of a gesture? Where does the meaning lie? Is "meaning" a state of consciousness, or is it some other kind of psychic stuff pulled out of the inner recesses of the mind—as many assert and many more believe? Or is it, as even more would hold, some kind of quality intrinsic to whatever is recognized to have meaning? Mead rejects both of these aged and widely held views. For him, "meaning" is neither psychic stuff added to or fused into an already existing bit of behavior or object nor a quality already resident in the behavior or object, waiting merely to be observed. Instead, for him, "meaning" exists in the form of future action called for or represented by the behavior or object observed. Let me make this abstract statement clear by returning to the analysis of interaction since, for Mead, all meaning and all meanings arise in social interaction. Put simply, the meaning of a gesture is the prospective action for which the gesture stands. This prospective action includes that of both participants. For example, in the case of the robber's command to the victim to "Put up your hands," the command obviously calls for a prospective action on the part of the victim, to wit, raising the arms. However, the command also points to prospective action on the part of the robber, either in the form of moving to go through the victim's pockets or of possibly shooting the victim if the latter doesn't comply with the command; in this sense, as previously mentioned, the gesture is an early part of the line of action of the actor and stands for his prospective action to follow after the gesture. The meaning of the gesture, accord-

ingly, may have a double line of significance; as an indication, it points to prospective action on the part of each of the participants. The robber's command signifies not only the action the victim is supposed to perform in response to the command, but also a prospective action by the robber as a follow-up to his command. The meaning of the gesture as given by the anticipated joint response, as Mead always emphasizes, lies inside the larger joint act in which the participants are involved. Mead calls this larger joint act the "social act." It represents or refers to a continuing step-by-step aligning of the actions of the participants inside of a larger pattern that has a beginning, an end, and a distinguishing character of its own. In the case of the robber and his victim, the social act would be what we call a "holdup" or an "armed robbery." A gesture made inside of a social act implies this larger joint act. Thus the robber's command to put up the hands signifies not only the raising of the arms by the victim and a given follow-up action by the robber but also the larger joint action represented by a "holdup." Indeed, there are times when the robber has to make clear to the victim in advance what the joint act or social act in which they are about to engage is by saying "This is a holdup" before adding "Put up your hands." Usually he doesn't have to provide the explanation, because the victim understands from the simple command that the larger joint act, the holdup, is about to take place.

I trust that the above explanation makes clear what Mead has in mind by the "triadic" nature of meaning as arising in social interaction. The reader can apply the lines of the explanation to Mead's abstract statement (1934, 75-6), which I feel deserves to be quoted.

Meaning arises and lies within the field of the relation between the gesture of a given human organism and the subsequent behavior of this organism as indicated to another human organism by that gesture. If that gesture does so indicate to another organism the subsequent (or resultant) behavior of the given organism, then it has meaning. In other words, the relationship between a given stimulus—as a gesture—and the latter phases of the social act of which it is an early (if not the initial) phase constitutes the field within which meaning originates and exists. Meaning is thus a development of something objectively there as a relation between certain phases of the social act; it is not a psychological addition to that act and it is not an "idea" as traditionally conceived. A gesture by one organism, the resultant of the social act in which the gesture is an early phase, and the response of another organism to the gesture, are the related in a triple or threefold relationship of gesture to first organism, of gesture to second organism, and of gesture

to subsequent phases of the given social act; and this threefold relationship constitutes the matrix within which meaning arises, or which develops into the field of meaning. The gesture stands for a certain resultant of the social act, a resultant to which there is a definite response on the part of the individuals involved therein; so that the meaning is given or stated in terms of response.

The meaning of the gesture runs in three directions: an indication of the expected response on the part of the person to whom the gesture is directed, an implication of the anticipated follow-up action on the part of the person making the gesture, and an indication of the larger social action in which the participants are engaged or about to become engaged. The gesture, as a "significant symbol," signifies this threefold line of prospective action. Now, if the person making the gesture and the person to whom the gesture is directed "see" the gesture alike, as standing for the same three lines of prospective action, then the gesture has a *common* meaning for them or is a common symbol. In this event, it is possible for their joint action to proceed effectively, that is, for them to move ahead and fix their respective actions to one another. If, however, there is a difference in understanding between them with regard to the prospective action along one of the three lines implied by the gesture, then the ongoing joint action is impeded, sometimes being merely hindered and sometimes abruptly blocked. Let me illustrate again. If the victim, for example, does not understand the command "put up your hands"—perhaps because the victim does not speak the language of the robber—then, of course, the victim is in no position to comply with the command. Or, if the victim believes that the robber has no intention of following up his command by attacking or shooting in the event the victim refuses to comply, the gesture will have a different meaning, and the victim may not respond as expected. Still further, if the victim does not recognize the robber's command as signifying the larger social act, or "holdup"—as might well happen if the command came from a colleague or presumed friend—then, the meaning of the gesture is again not clear; the victim is likely to respond in such ways as saying "What is the meaning of all this" or "Quit your joking." These few observations should make clear Mead's point, namely, that effective execution of the joint action for which the gesture stands requires that both participants attach the same meaning to the gesture; if this same or common meaning is not present, the joint action is impeded, even if only momentarily so, and indeed may be broken at this point. In this event, for the social act to continue (for the "holdup" to take place), it is necessary for the actor (the robber) to make new indications clarifying and reaffirming the original indications; or the inability or refusal by the other person to get the

meaning of the indication may require a discontinuation of the social act or a shift to a new social act. The point Mead emphasizes is that effective interaction on the symbolic level requires the participants to employ *common symbols*. These symbols do not exist merely in common words but instead in the attachment of the same meaning to the gestures or indications made by the participants to each other.

This is an appropriate place to consider the nature of *communication* as conceived by Mead. He identifies it precisely with interaction that makes use of significant symbols, that is, gestures that have the same meaning for the individual who makes them as they do for the person or persons to whom they are directed. Properly understood, the ordinary view that communication is a transmission of "ideas" from person to person is valid. The "transmission," however, is not a conveying of some kind of psychic element separate from behavior; instead it occurs in the form of an indication of what is to be done. The command of the robber to put up the hands designates a specified course of action to the victim. Communication has taken place when the victim "understands" this designation. If the victim does not understand the designation, communication has not occurred, and the victim will be unable to comply with the command or will be hampered or confused as to what to do. In this event, if the robber recognizes that the victim does not understand the command, the robber may resort to other gestures to make it clear to the victim; for instance, the robber might model raising the arms or indicate the act is indeed a "holdup" or that the robber "means business." Communication is an indication understood in the same way by the person to whom it is made and the person who makes it. This common understanding of the meaning of indicated gestures is the *sine qua non* of communication. If this common understanding is absent, there is no communication; and if the common understanding is limited to only partial aspects of the indications, the communication is partial and inadequate. The effective alignment by individuals of their activity to one another depends on their grasping the common meaning of each other's indications or gestures.

We must delve further into the nature of communication and the act of indication. Communication must be seen in the context of "role-taking." To make an indication to another person to do something, it is necessary to take the role of that person—to view the action expected of the other person from that person's position or standpoint. The indication is made to the person in terms of where *that person* is and what he or she is to do; one has to map out or designate the line of action of the person from the latter's position as the author of the prospective action. Correspondingly, the person to whom the indication is made has to view it from the standpoint of the one who makes the indication—equivalent eventually



to noting that "This is what that person wants me to do" or to asking "What is it that person wants me to do?" or "What does that person have in mind?" This mutual role-taking is essential to communication. Each of the two participants has to take the role of the other in order to grasp the meaning of the gesture or indication. And this is what distinguishes communication from mere response of organism to organism in interaction, as in the case of nonsymbolic interaction. This distinction sets apart true communication from "signaling," as in the case of animals, or from simulated communication, as in the case of a cybernetic machine. It is what Mead had in mind in his famous and often quoted remark to the effect that a gesture is significant when the person who makes it responds to it in the same way as does the person to whom it is made. One responds to one's own gesture in the manner of the other person by taking the role of the other person. Let us apply this distinctive feature of communication to signaling in the case of animals. A stag that strikes a certain posture in response to a noise or movement on the horizon, and in doing so "alerts" the herd of deer and prepares them for possible flight, can scarcely be said to be engaging in an act of communication. To be communication, the posture he strikes would have to be something other than a *response* to a disturbing movement or noise; he would have to strike it because of an *intention* to warn the members of the herd and thus would presuppose an understanding by the stag of how the deer would respond on seeing him strike the given posture. The posture would have to be an indication directed to them from the standpoint of a prospective action by them, not merely a response by him to a disturbing stimulus. Similarly, the deer would have to take the role of the stag and interpret the latter's posture as an indication that he was warning them. The fact that animals may respond aptly and skillfully to each other's movements, and especially sounds, does not establish that they are engaged in communication. Communication occurs only when gestures become indications. Gestures become indications only when those who make and respond to them are guided in doing so by taking each other's roles. Interaction on the symbolic level is not mere interstimulation and response as conventionally understood.

Another stage needs now to be added to the analysis of social interaction on the symbolic level—a stage that follows grasping the meaning of the indicatory gesture. Here we turn to the person to whom the indication is directed. After interpreting the gesture by ascertaining its meaning along the three lines that it involves, the responding person is put in the position of *devising* a plan of response. There is nothing in this logical position in the interaction that limits one to, or compels of one, the single response called for by the indication. Even after grasping the meaning of the indication as intended by the person making it, one may decide to respond differently to it. The victim, even though understanding clearly

the meaning of the robber's command, may respond on the basis of other considerations. The victim may quickly survey the surroundings to see if there is a possible route of escape, "stall for time" by feigning not having heard the command, quickly judge the possibility of putting up a fight, plead with the robber to abandon the holdup, decide that the robber would not risk others' hearing a shot, or decide to try "out-talking" the robber. As these few remarks suggest, while it would be unlikely for the victim not to comply with the robber's command, the victim is not logically limited to such compliance. On the basis of other things he may take into account, he may devise other modes of response. If this variability of response may occur (as it frequently does) in the case of such a perilous and compelling gesture as the robber's command, we can appreciate the greater latitude of possible response to other gestures of a less threatening nature. The analysis of symbolic interaction requires recognizing that the grasping of the meaning of the indication or gesture need not be the sole factor on which an individual bases a response.

To complete our present line of analysis, we should recognize that the overt response made to the indicatory gesture of another person usually serves, in turn, as a gesture or indication to this other person. Likewise, the person who makes the overt response takes the role of the other and uses the response as an indication to the other person; the response is then interpreted and used as a basis for framing this latter person's own overt response. Interaction between human beings on the symbolic level is a running sequence of indication, interpretation, devising of response, and execution of response, with the overt response serving as an indication to initiate anew the sequence in the reverse direction, and so on. The fitting together of the lines of action of those interacting takes place in this manner.

Such is the schema of interaction on the symbolic level that Mead presents. It is not the complete account since, as given so far, it does not include the important matters of self-interaction and the construction of "objects," on which Mead places major stress. These matters will have to be made clear in subsequent discussion before they are introduced into a fuller treatment of interaction on the symbolic level. The account we have given suffices, however, for our immediate purpose. This purpose is twofold: first, to sketch the distinctive nature of symbolic interaction and, second, to note that it must be taken seriously in its own right as a generating factor of supreme importance. The remainder of the discussion in this chapter will be devoted to an elaboration of these two matters.

The unique character of symbolic interaction lies, as we have seen, in the fact that the participants take each other's roles. To take the role of another consists in viewing the action of that person from that person's position as an actor. Such

role-taking occurs in each of the three basic segments of symbolic interaction—indication, interpretation of the indication, and devising a response. An indication to another person has to be made from the standpoint of that person's position and in terms of his prospective action; similarly, an interpretation of the indication must be made in terms of the position and expected action of the person who makes the indication; and, finally, to devise a response, one must anticipate the way in which it will be met by the other person. Role-taking is thus fundamental to symbolic interaction. Such role-taking introduces the element of explicit meaning and, in doing so, elevates social interaction to a new and different plane. Explicit meaning is introduced in the sense that response to each other's actions is made not in terms of these actions as immediately given but in terms of an understanding of what these actions mean. This understanding of what the actions mean has to be *formed* and is not contained in the perceived actions as immediately given. The presence of role-taking and the execution of a response on the basis of meaning set symbolic interaction apart from social interaction as conventionally conceived. The conventional conception pictures organisms as engaging in interstimulation and response, in which each organism responds to the immediate character of the action as presented by the other organism. The scheme is one of stimulus and response in which meaning is left out; or if "meaning" is included, it is lodged in the stimulus as something intrinsic to the stimulus instead of something the responding organism brings to the stimulus. The scheme in the case of symbolic interaction is stimulus—meaning—response, in which meaning is the crucial element.

The pivoting of interaction around meaning involves three important differences. First, since the meaning of the action exists in the form of what the action stands for, namely, the future or anticipated action of which it is a part, interaction between the organisms is not in terms of their immediately presented behavior but in terms of their anticipated behavior. What is decisive is not the character or stimulus quality of the action as presented but instead the prospective or future behavior to which it points; and what this prospective behavior is depends on how the individual *interprets* the action that is immediately given. There is a shift here in the basis of interaction from immediate action as presented to future action as presaged. Second, in taking the role of the other person, one is essentially rehearsing in one's own imagination the prospective action of that other person; to indicate to another to do something, one must perforce perform that act imaginatively oneself. This form of enacting within oneself the prospective action of the other gives symbolic interaction a social dimension that is completely missing in an external social interaction between two organisms. The "social" ceases to be a mere exterior relation between perceiving organisms in

association and assumes the character of an assimilative or interiorized relation. Psychologists and social scientists have yet to grasp and plumb the full significance of this new dimension of the "social." Third, the ability to ascertain or cut out the prospective action for which the immediately given action stands enables one to devise or organize his response instead of merely responding unwittingly to the indication. In a true sense, what we call the "response" is an *action toward* the indication instead of a reaction released by the indication. Activity becomes self-directed instead of being merely evoked. We shall understand this latter point more fully after the subsequent discussion of the self. We mention it here merely to call attention to one of the distinctive facets of symbolic interaction. These few observations indicate that symbolic interaction is a unique form of social interaction.

Now let us turn to our other major point, namely, that symbolic interaction is a generative or formative agency in its own right and not a mere medium for the operation of other factors that are supposed to account for what takes place in interaction. To put this matter or problem in proper perspective, it is well to remind the reader of the general way in which sociologists and psychologists treat social interaction. Sociologists, despite the verbal homage they pay to social interaction, treat it essentially as a neutral medium for the operation or play of social factors derived from the organization or structure of the society. The conventional conception held by sociologists is quite clear. Social interaction is regarded as taking place *inside of* an organized society. As such it is held to be shaped and structured by the character of the organized society and to be a medium in which features of the organized society come to expression in action. Thus, the behavior of people in interaction and the interaction itself, are customarily explained in such terms as norms, values, social roles, social positions, status demands, folkways, mores, and cultural definitions. In such usage, social interaction is reduced to a mere forum for the play of societal or structural factors. Social interaction adds nothing to the analysis, existing, so to speak, as merely the stage on which the decisive parts are played by other factors that determine how the participants are to act. Behavior is accounted for by factors brought by the participants to the interaction or is explained by the social positions or roles occupied by the participants in the interaction. Social interaction as such is swallowed up in the social structure within which it is alleged to take place.

A similar relegation of social interaction to the status of a neutral medium is made in the conventional treatment by psychologists. The psychologist is disposed to account for the behavior of people engaged in interaction by making use of psychological factors or processes lodged in the individual. Thus he is likely to resort to such factors as organic drives, motives, feelings, unconscious

mechanisms, attitudes, perception, and cognition to explain how people behave in association with each other. In this usage, social interaction becomes, again, a mere field of operation for the given psychological factors. It contributes nothing itself to the analysis or explanation of behavior. This picture of social interaction as a neutral medium is not changed, of course, by merely making some type of combination of psychological and sociological factors, such as internalization of group norms and values in the individual in the form of motives, or some type of socialization of drives or feelings. Social interaction is still treated as a medium in which the combined psychological and sociological factors, whatever the combination may be, operate to determine and account for what takes place in interaction.

Mead's thesis stands in marked contrast to these typical sociological and psychological approaches. For him, social interaction is of utmost importance in its own right. It is not a mere context in which social and psychological factors are in play. It has its own distinctive character—a character that is lost in treating it as a mere medium for the expression of factors lodged either in the structure of society or in the psychological makeup of the individual participants. Further, it is a formative agency that makes its own contribution—a contribution that, again, cannot and should not be sought in alleged societal and psychological factors. Mead sees social interaction, first of all, as the real stuff of *group* life and not merely as a kind of subsidiary medium operating inside of group life. Human social interaction consists of people acting and reacting to one another; this is what group life is—the veritable association of people in all of their diverse encounters and the whole complex of their activities toward and with regard to one another. Any posited social structure and psychological makeup of human beings in interaction is derived or abstracted from the actual interaction in which their lives are conducted. To turn around and explain social interaction in terms of such derivations is to reverse the true order of relationship. The alleged social and psychological factors are emergents out of social interaction rather than social interaction being caused by, or explained by, such factors. Social interaction is the point of departure for an analysis of what takes place in group life rather than something incidental that can be ignored or, ironically, treated as a mere set of channels for the flow of factors brought in from the outside.

Aside from the fact that social interaction constitutes group life, what leads Mead to regard it as a formative agency in its own right and thus to assign it to a position of paramount importance in social analysis? The answer must be sought in an appreciation of what takes place in symbolic interaction. The significant thing about interaction on the symbolic level is that the action of the participants is formed by their having to *take account* of the actions of the others.

The responses of others thus enter into the formation of one's own line of conduct. This simple fact means, first, that the conduct of the participant cannot be understood or explained except in terms of the interaction and, second, that the joint action of the participants must be seen as a product of their interaction and not a creation of a social structure. Let me make each of these two matters clear.

In the first case, we have to note that the line of action of a participant in interaction has to be built up in terms of how the other participants respond or might respond to what a participant does or plans to do. In a two-person interaction, one participant's line of action turns in its formation around the action of the other person and, in particular, has to accommodate itself to any response that diverges from what was expected. The possible forms of such divergence in response are multitudinous, covering, among others, such familiar reactions as hesitation, stubbornness, opposition, sheer refusal, criticism, condemnation, ambiguity, and lack of comprehension; or, on the more positive side, such responses as unexpected acquiescence, overeagerness, novel and enlightening suggestions, and new stimulating proposals. In the face of responses that challenge, or diverge from, the expected line of action, it is necessary for either person's line of action to take new turns. In symbolic interaction, one never goes sailing along merely on one's own but has to deal with the hard fact of the actions of the other participants. These actions of others set the conditions around which one's own line of conduct has to be built up. It is this fact that makes untenable any explanation of the line of action of a participant in terms of social or psychological equipment with which the participant enters into interaction. This equipment obviously does not govern or account for the responses of others; yet these responses constitute a vital and inescapable factor in forming or forging a line of action. Accordingly, to explain the line of action of a participant, one cannot rely merely on postulated elements of the participant's social or psychological makeup; one has to include the responses of others around which the participant's line of action is constructed. A line of action can be understood and interpreted only as a part of a joint action that is in process.

Most scholars in psychology and sociology seem unable to grasp this simple point, which is revealed by the very character of social interaction. Their typical procedure is to explain behavior as if lines of conduct were a mere unrolling or outward expression of dispositions lodged in the individual participants. They believe that if one identifies the appropriate motivating or guiding disposition—a motive, an attitude, a value, an unconscious complex, or a cognitive mechanism—one has the key to explaining the line of conduct or predicting the line of conduct. This belief presupposes an unrealistic picture of the field of social interaction; it presumes that the actions of others implicated in the line of conduct are of no

consequence or that such actions always comply with that line of conduct. But if the lines of conduct of these others are also to be accounted for in terms of motivating dispositions, the responses of all others in the case of each line of conduct would be similarly compliant to each such line of conduct. This would make social interaction a mere complex of compliant responses on the part of all participants. One can find, of course, such instances of interaction wherein the motivating dispositions of all participants neatly dovetail and their anticipated and actual responses neatly interlock in compliance with each other. Even in this case, however, the compliant responses of others have to be taken into account by the actor—they constitute “go-ahead” signals for the unimpeded prosecution of the actor’s own act. But as soon as there is variance between the motivating dispositions of the participants and as soon as anticipated or actual responses diverge from what any line of action presupposes, the field of interaction takes on a different character. Then it is necessary to reorient behavior in the light of the divergent responses. One now has to introduce something other than the motivating disposition to account for the line of conduct. This is precisely the difficulty that confronts efforts to predict conduct on the basis of an original motive and attitude. One may not know how others are going to respond to the line of action represented by the motive or attitude; if the response does not fit in with the prospective line of action, the line of action will have to accommodate itself in some manner to the uncompliant response.

The responses of others enter to affect and set the course of one’s own line of conduct; this is true even though the responses are fully compliant with the line of conduct. The responses of others have to be brought into the picture. These responses lie in the field of interaction and not in the psychological makeup of the participant. Consequently, Mead would argue that this field or process of interaction has to be introduced into the explanation of the lines of action formed by the participants inside of their interaction. In the give and take between participants in interaction, action may “rub” against action so that the participants are hindering each other, opposing each other, challenging each other, inciting each other, and turning each other in new directions. This is a process in its own right and cannot be squeezed inside the social and psychological equipment of the participants.

Now let us turn to the second point, namely, that the joint action formed by people in their interaction is a product of that interaction and not of a posited social structure inside of which the interaction is declared to take place. There should be no difficulty in recognizing the truth of the first part of this statement. Joint action is formed by the participants’ fitting their respective lines of action to each other; and this is done by the participants’ taking account of each other’s

anticipated and actual responses. The matter at issue shifts then to the question of whether the interaction follows a pattern or reproduces a mold imposed on it by an embracing social structure. To follow such a pattern would mean that the indications, their interpretations, and the devising of responses in their interknit relation are prescribed by the given social structure. We may note, to be sure, such instances of social interaction in human group life—conventionalized and ritualized areas in which the course of interaction is rigidly charted and followed. But alongside such areas are others, in which the flow of interaction or the fitting of act to act is open and fluid. Let us identify some of these areas and say a few words about each. One such area is that of playful expression, as in the case of amusement, fun, banter, humor, and gossip, wherein the novelty of event and the originality of comment open the door to flexible and new indications and, similarly, to flexible and new responses. Next, we can note the area of personal relations, in which there come into play likes and dislikes, love and hatred, rivalry and attachment, insult and resentment, envy and admiration, respect and belittlement, and the like. Personal relations may intrude mightily into the flow of social interaction and affect vitally its course and end. Next we should observe the significant areas of “adversary” relationship—the areas of conflict, dispute, disagreement, quarreling, and opposition—to be found in all human societies, even though in different degrees. In such areas, interaction is marked by feinting and parrying, laying traps, springing surprises, searching for weaknesses and advantages, exercising power or trying to build up power, and protecting oneself from similar pursuits by one’s adversary. Lines of action are formed by individuals in such interaction less by adhering to social rules, which are only a framework, and more by the exercise of ingenuity, judgment, and discretion. And the outcome of such interaction favors concession, compromise, and the formation of unforeseen workable adjustments. Finally, we note the ever recurring areas of “problems,” wherein participants are jointly confronted with new troublesome and sometimes dire situations for which current modes of solution are insufficient and for which new ones have to be devised. This is an area of interaction in which a premium is placed on serious discussion, imaginative thought, interplay of stimulating suggestions, proposals and counter proposals, and piecing together a new collective decision. To note these various fields of fluid interplay between people is to appreciate the many areas of human group life in which social interaction is not charted or laid out neatly by a preestablished pattern. These are areas in which responses are forged to meet the needs of the situation, not to comply with established rules. While a framework of propriety and formal rules usually surrounds the forging of the action—such as in the case of courtroom procedures, or rules of discussion or etiquette of social roles—this framework should not be mistaken



for the joint action that is built up within it. The proper position implied in Mead's view is to recognize that social interaction in human group life ranges from instances of compliance with rigid and stereotyped patterns to instances of uncharted and unprescribed lines of development. It is a grievous mistake to try to force all of them inside the model represented by the first of the two extremes. This is the error committed by those scholars who treat human social interaction as being naturally patterned by social structure.

It should be evident that interaction on the symbolic level imposes no intrinsic or logical need that the action formed through it—whether joint or individual—must follow a preordained path and move to an established end. The interaction process is potentially an open and flexible affair, carrying within it the conditions, the occasions, and the means of its own revision and redirection. The central elements—indication, interpretation, and devising of responses—introduce the possibilities of a diverse career and of an uncertain termination to both the joint action being developed and the individual acts that enter into it.

This possibility of uncertainty as to the course of action may have several sources. It may arise from an inadequacy of communication—either from a failure to make clear indications or from a failure to grasp properly the meaning of the indications. This deficiency in communication accounts for much of the difficulty in fitting action to action, much of the shiftiness and uncertainty taken by the course of action, and much of the inability of interaction to reach clear ends. The vagueness of understanding in the case of poorly presented or abstruse discussions illustrates this widespread type of uncertainty in the course and outcome of interaction.

But beyond this source of uncertainty is another that is much more formidable. It is constituted by the ever recurring possibility that the participants in interaction, while understanding each other's indications clearly, may organize their responses on the basis of matters other than the indications that are made to them—such as being guided by pictures of their respective interests, or by taking account of the peculiarities of their situation, or by being affected by personal elements in the interaction, or by considering the judgments of outside groups. Such matters may lead the responding party to reply to the indication or gesture of the other party with an action different from that to which the indication points. As such unanticipated, different, and contrary responses are made, the course of the interaction and its outcome are made uncertain. Students of human group life should not blind themselves to this potential uncertainty of the course of interaction on the symbolic level. This potentiality is a natural or intrinsic aspect of human association.

The potential uncertainty of the course of social interaction that arises from

the differing responses of the participants makes untenable any contention that human social interaction has, or centers around, a given "natural" or intrinsic form. Several leading scholars, for example, voice a view to the effect that intrinsically human social interaction is made up of, or leads to, complementary expectations. This odd notion flies in the face of facts. It should be clear, if one understands the role of indication, interpretation, and the devising of response, that expectations of how each other will respond need not be complementary at all. Furthermore, even if they are complementary, this does not imply necessarily that the responses will be complementary. This same general observation applies equally to any other contention that would reduce human social interaction to some special form as its natural prototype. Social interaction is not alien to any of the forms that may enter into it. The diversified character of human social interaction is indicated by what it embraces—cooperation as well as opposition, rigid adherence to ritual forms as well as open and free play, dull and uninspired repetition as well as new and developing formation. Those who find its prototype in a cooperative and harmonious model or conversely in a conflict model, in a model of traditional adherence or conversely in a model of rebellious rejection, in a model of conformity or conversely in a model of deviation are all alike in misreading its nature. It is amenable to all of these types. No one model warrants being picked out as its natural form or rejected as alien and abnormal. All that we need note is the generic nature of symbolic interaction, namely, that it proceeds through the making of indications, their interpretation, and the devising of responses. The kinds of joint acts that emerge out of this process and the ways in which individual lines of action fit together vary a great deal.

The basic lines of Mead's views of human social interaction should now be clear. To sum up the discussion thus far, we note that he recognized that social interaction necessarily constituted the stuff of *group* life since it is only in interaction that a group has its being. In the human group, the most important form of interaction takes place on the symbolic level. Symbolic interaction is unique in that the participants respond to each other's actions on the basis of the "meaning" of these actions. This element of meaning necessarily introduces into interaction three fundamental processes—the making of indications, the interpretation of the indications, and the devising of responses. It is by means of these three processes that the participants fit together their respective lines of action into a joint action, or what Mead terms the "social act." The lines of action of the participants and the joint action developed have their roots and being in the process of social interaction. They have to be studied, understood, and explained in terms of the social interaction that produces them. There are instances of social interaction in which individual lines of conduct are no more than an unrolling of the psychological

dispositions of the participants, and there are instances in which lines of conduct are completely charted in advance; there are instances of smooth, compliant relationship and instances of conventionalized and ritualized relationship. However, it is a mistake to use such instances either as representative of human social interaction or as its prototype. There are many areas of human interaction in which responses are divergent and in the face of which, lines of action have to be tempered, re-charted, revised, and frequently abandoned. In such instances, the explanation of lines of individual conduct and of joint action is not yielded by either the social and psychological equipment of the participants or the character of a supposititious social structure. One has to go to the process of social interaction for the explanation. Social interaction—whether it takes the form of mutual compliance, adherence to precharted prescriptions, or open development—is the process by which group life is carried on. As a process, it may sustain prevailing forms of conduct, create new forms, or reinstate old forms. Out of the process may emerge new objects, new acts, and new kinds of actors; and through the process, established objects may disappear or get new meanings, old acts may crumble, and previous types of actors may become museum pieces. Human social interaction is more like a cauldron than a stamping machine, more in the nature of a dynamic, ongoing development than a static repetition. It represents human life in process.

It is this view of human social interaction, especially, of course, on the symbolic level, that Mead uses as his point of departure for the analysis of human conduct, mind, self, and society. We begin this larger analysis with his important treatment of the nature of the significance of “objects.”



THE CONCEPT OF “object” occupies a central position in Mead’s analysis of human action. Objects constitute the individual’s operating environment, the things toward which the individual is oriented, the focal points around which the individual’s activity becomes organized, and the implements by which the individual’s activity is built up in a step-by-step sequence. Put otherwise, one would understand the organization of a human being as an actor to the extent to which one would know the nature of the individual’s objects; and one would be in a position to understand any one of the individual’s specific acts to the extent to which one could identify the objects toward which an action is directed and observe how the individual uses objects in developing the line of conduct. These same declarations apply equally well to an acting group. Such a group similarly lives, acts, and is organized in terms of its objects. In understanding Mead’s analysis of objects, one can see the profound way by which they enter into the formation of human conduct and appreciate the significant implications the analysis has for the study and interpretation of human conduct.

We are accustomed perhaps to think of “objects” as the hard and physical things in our world, such as a table, a hammer, a building, and the like. Mead uses the term in a broader sense to mean anything that can be referred to or designated—a chair, a house, a horse, a woman, a soldier, a friend, a university, a law, a war, a meeting, a debate, a ghost, a task, a problem, a vacuum, and abstract things such as liberty, charity, intelligence, and stupidity. In this legitimate sense of being anything that can be designated or referred to, objects may be material or immaterial, real or imaginary; may be placed in the outer world or, as in the case of a sensation or a pain, lodged inside the body; and may have the character of an enduring substance such as a mountain or be a passing event such as a kiss. If the individual notes or is aware of any one of these things, it is an object for that individual. It should be immediately apparent that objects constitute the world or operating environment of the human being and of a human group. For an individual this environment or world of objects may consist of such things as a dwelling place, a spouse, the material objects around and about, associates, place

of employment, and job; it may also include the individual's body—a very important object indeed—hunger if the individual is aware of it, praise from an employer, worries, and prospective vacation. This may strike the reader as an odd way to use the term “object,” but it is not, as we can easily see by recognizing that any of the things mentioned may be “objects” of attention to the individual and, accordingly, things toward which that individual is prepared to act. A stomachache may become very much of an object to an individual, as can an onerous task, a despised politician, a hated ethnic group, or a cloud formation signifying a likely thunder shower. All of these things and their like may be objects to the individual—and are objects if the individual notes them or is aware of them. Taken together, they constitute *the individual's* world of existence, that is, the things the individual deals with in life activity. To make this point clearer initially, let us point out that if there were something the individual could not note or did not note, it would not exist *for that individual*; being unaware of it, the person couldn't refer to it, talk about it, direct action toward it, or do anything with regard to it. These same observations extend to the operating world of a group; the group's world consists likewise of objects—those common to the group. Every acting group has its world of objects, whether the group is a family, a boys' or girls' gang, a labor union, a chamber of commerce, a radical political movement, an army, a convent, or a priesthood. The world of objects of a group would consist of the things to which it pays attention and with which it deals—a bank deposit, interfering policemen, an unfriendly management, opportunities for industrial expansion, a corrupt political system, disheartening guerrilla warfare, the piety of religious exercise, and multitudes of other objects as the case may be for the given group.

I trust that these few remarks make clear what Mead means by an object and show that the world of existence for an individual or group consists of objects. The individual stands over against the objects (an object necessarily presupposes a subject); the very fact that an object is something the individual designates means that logically the individual occupies a position apart from it. In this sense, the object is part of the individual's operating environment or world of existence. This is true not only of objects that are physically exterior, such as the chair in which the individual sits; it is also true of any of the physical objects located spatially inside the body, such as the lungs; it is also true of so-called mental objects the individual may note, such as a toothache, a memory of a pleasant experience, or a prospective plan of action the individual is rehearsing in imagination. If an individual notes any of these things, in the position of a subject the individual stands apart from them. It is in this legitimate sense that an individual's operating world—the world the individual deals with—is constituted by objects.

Again, the same general characterization applies to an acting group. Through its means of communication, the group may collectively designate objects, establish a world of very diverse objects, stand over against the objects as an acting entity that has to deal with them, and organize itself to act toward the objects.

It should be immediately apparent that there is an intimate connection between objects and action. Objects are the things that engage the attention of human beings, the things about which they think or talk, the things toward which they may plan to act, and the things toward which they actually do act. The round of activity of an individual and of a human group is made up of actions toward objects in their respective worlds. Indeed, this suggests a very effective way of understanding differences in behavior between individuals and between groups. By identifying the objects with which they deal and toward which they act, one can put one's finger on a very basic reason for differences in their behavior and makeup. The life of a university scholar, for example, centers on a very different set of objects from the set that is of concern to a professional pickpocket, and their respective worlds of objects are different from those of politicians, priests, army generals, prostitutes, bankers, bohemian artists, and migrant farm workers. Each group has a different array of objects and activities. This observation may be extended outward to large groups, such as a tribe or a peasant, feudal, or modern industrial society; each has a different universe of objects and a different complex of activity organized around its objects. The observation may also be narrowed down to each individual human being; in a legitimate sense, each has a set of objects and an organization of conduct corresponding to it. If one were able to identify clearly the world of objects of an individual or the world of objects of any group, one would be in a position to understand the life of the individual or group and secure the key to an understanding of their respective lines of behavior. The close connection between human action and the objects of such action explains the relevance of Mead's analysis of objects.

We may begin the analysis by noting that every object has a meaning or character. A chair means one thing, a horse another, a prostitute another, a declaration of independence something else, an imaginary demon something else, a toothache something else, and so on, across the board, with all objects. Each object has a meaning or character that distinguishes it from other objects. This meaning constitutes the nature of the object for the individual for whom the object exists. One confronts an object, sees it, refers to it, talks about it, or acts toward it in terms of the meaning it has for one. If one regards tomatoes as poisonous, one is not likely to wittingly eat them; if one regards a person as having evil intent, one will be prepared to act differently than if one regards the person as a friend; if snails are seen as a delectable food, they will be eaten instead of shunned; if a

religious relic is regarded as holy, it will be treated as such. This is true of each and every object. No object exists for a person except in terms of a meaning it has for the person. The meaning of the object may be definite and precise, as in the case of a chair or a hammer, or it may be very vague and diffuse, as in the case of an abstract object such as democracy or existentialism; the meaning of an object may be that the object is imaginary, as in the case of a ghost, or that the object is self-contradictory, as in the case of a square circle; the meaning of the object may be "puzzling"; or its meaning may even be that it has no meaning, in which event we speak of it as a "meaningless object"—which is then its meaning. In each instance, the object is seen, referred to, considered, approached, and acted toward on the basis of the meaning it has for the actor. I do not wish to belabor this point, but it is necessary to keep in mind that one is prepared to act toward an object on the basis of the meaning the object has for one. This is true in the case of all of the objects that exist for an individual and for a group. In this sense, the human being and the human group may be said to live and act in a world of meanings.

For Mead, as we have already seen in earlier discussion, meaning is not something that is inherent in an object; it is not something that is an intrinsic part or attribute of the "natural being" of the object, whatever such a notion may mean. Instead, the meaning of an object is conferred on it by those who are prepared to act toward it. We see this clearly enough on an immediate level when we note the strikingly different ways in which divergent people may regard what is ostensibly the same object. A tree is not likely to be the same object to a lumberman, a botanist, and a poet; communism has different meanings for a Wall Street broker and for a fervent Communist; a crucifix means one thing to a devout Catholic and another to a person having no experience with the Christian religion; a person who is a hero for one group may be seen as a villain by another. As these casual illustrations suggest, the meaning of the object does not emanate from something intrinsic in the object but is given, instead, by the way in which the object is viewed, approached, or used by those for whom it is an object. The meaning of an object exists in a *relation* between the object and the subject for whom it is an object; its meaning exists in how the subject designates the object. If people designate or see a given thing differently, it will have different meanings for them.

Mead's treatment, accordingly, is to locate the source of the meaning of an object in the way in which one is prepared to act toward it. He declares that the features or defining characteristics that make any object what it is arise only out of the kind of action one is prepared to direct toward the object and the kind of experiences that action would yield if it were carried out. For example, a chair exists as such only if one is prepared to see it as something in which to seat

oneself. It may seem odd to say that one would not see it as a chair if one were not already prepared to act toward it in this way. Yet this is the case. A nomadic people, accustomed to squatting on the ground, with no knowledge of chairs, or never having seen or heard of them being used as we use them, would not see a chair as such if it were suddenly brought into their field of vision. They would see it as some other kind of object, possibly as a weapon or as a rack on which to hang things, but not as a chair. The kind of object it would be for them would depend on how they were initially prepared to act toward it. Aside from its use as something to sit upon, a chair has other features that enter into one's perception of it, such as the hardness of the seat, the smoothness of the surface of the arms, and the curve of the back. Such features as these are also regarded by Mead as standing for and arising out of the individual's preparation to act toward the chair—in this instance to handle the chair. The hardness of the seat comes only from the experience of resistance that one has in pressing against a hard object; the smoothness of the surface of the arms can arise only as an experience, such as running one's fingertips over a surface that yields the sensation of smoothness, and the curvature of the back is similarly yielded by the sense of rotundity that comes from sweeping one's hand over the surface. These features represent experiences one would have if one were to act toward the chair in a given way, in this case handling it. All of these features—the use of the chair as something in which to seat oneself, its hard material, the smoothness of its surface, and so forth—represent lines of action and experiences that such lines of action would yield. In this sense the character of the object is set by the way one is prepared to act toward it. Another way Mead states this point is to declare that *an object is a plan of action*. This statement means nothing abstruse or mystical; it merely means that the object is perceived in terms of ways in which the individual is organized or prepared to act toward it, together with the experiences that would result were the action carried out.

I trust that this account clarifies Mead's contention that the meaning of an object is not something intrinsic or inherent in its makeup, merely awaiting observation, but that, instead, the meaning arises out of the way in which one is organized to act toward the object. Meaning lies in the field of action. The meaning of an object to an individual is constituted by the way in which the individual is prepared to approach it, use it, handle it, treat it, or refer to it in conversing with others. Some readers may object that this is a reversal of the real relation; they may be wont to declare that one approaches an object, uses it, handles it, treats it, or refers to it on the basis of, or as a result of, the meaning the object has; this would imply that the meaning comes first and the action follows. To avoid this seeming contradiction and source of confusion, let me explain that there is a



double stage of action in the case of the meaning of an object. The first stage is constituted by what I referred to above as the preparation to act, that is, the arousal in the individual of the tendencies to act that give the object its given character—for example, the tendencies to act toward a chair that give it the character of a chair. It is out of such tendencies to act that the object emerges with its given character or meaning. Now, however, once the object is seen as a given kind of object (i.e., as a chair), it can be used as a basis for other action; one can go and sit in the chair, point it out to someone else, talk about it, and so forth. This latter kind of action with regard to it would not be possible were the chair not already perceived as a chair (i.e., an object with a certain meaning), but, in turn, the perception of it as a chair only occurs as a result of an initial arousing of the tendencies to act toward it as a chair. A recognition of these two stages of action—(1) an initial preparation to act that gives the object its meaning and (2) a subsequent form of conduct carried out on the basis of this meaning—should be helpful in avoiding misunderstanding. We return, then, to Mead's point that the character and the distinguishing features of an object are a product of action. The meaning of an object is given by the way in which one is prepared to act toward it.

One must now ask what the source of the action (i.e., the tendencies to act) is that gives an object its meaning. Mead's answer to this question is that such action arises out of association with others and is formed in response to the defining acts of others. The source of meaning is thus lodged in the process of social interaction that we have previously considered. Stated otherwise, objects arise out of this process. Let me illustrate the matter by referring again to a chair as an object. To an infant born into our society, a chair does not exist as a chair—it has no meaning as such. The infant or young child has to learn what a chair is. This is done through the actions of others that operate to direct the child in how to act toward the chair. These actions of others consist of using the chair as something in which to seat themselves, encouraging the child to use the chair in this manner, admonishing the child not to knock the chair over or to pound it with a hammer, and referring to it in many diverse ways that show or suggest its proper use. All of these actions are indications that define for the child how to act toward chairs; they constitute a framework of actions into which the child has to fit his or her own actions. In taking the roles of those who are acting toward chairs or who are acting toward the child with reference to chairs, the child comes to perform, or rehearse imaginatively, their modes of action toward this object. In this way the child incorporates these actions toward chairs or these designations of chairs. These incorporated actions are embodied in the child in the form of tendencies to act toward chairs. This brief account presents the prototype of

the way in which meaning arises or, what amounts to the same thing, the way in which objects come into existence for the person.<sup>1</sup>

This important matter in Mead's treatment deserves elaboration. All objects, whatever they may be or for whatever group of human beings they may exist, are seen by Mead to be *social products* that emerge out of the process of social interaction. We imply this, of course, in our ordinary assertion that a person, particularly the young child, has to learn what things are. The infant or young child has to learn what such things as chairs, knives, telephones, horses, money, police, schools, clouds, rivers, and mountains are. Such things do not exist for the child prior to such learning. And, of course, the same thing is true in the case of older people as they come to form new objects, as in learning a trade, learning about new peoples, and acquiring new knowledge. Every object in a person's world of objects has to *come into existence* for that person. The object comes into existence when the person is able to designate it. But this designation of it arises, in turn, out of the ways in which it has been designated by others with whom the person interacts. The process involved here is that of taking the roles of those who make the designations and in so doing, coming to embody within oneself their designations or modes of action; these appear within the individual in the form of tendencies to act toward the object in the ways represented by the designations and actions of others. These tendencies to act toward the object give the object its distinctive character and meaning. For Mead, this is the way objects arise in the experience of people. They emerge out of a process of social interaction and may be regarded properly as creations of that process. Instead of existing with a previous self-contained or self-constituted character that merely awaits detection, objects are social products, made up of the actions of others, which are incorporated in the individual in the form of tendencies to act.<sup>2</sup>

It is by virtue of being products of social interaction that objects are formed with a character that is common for those involved in the interaction. In making indications to each other and in responding to each other's indications—in taking each other's roles in such interaction—people come to form, use, and transmit common designations of given objects. Consequently, such objects emerge with a character or meaning that is common to the participants in the interaction. In this way, the people develop what the logicians term a "universe of discourse," that is to say, designations with common meanings. In such a given "universe" of social interaction, the meaning is a "universal," having a content common to the participants. This intrinsic connection of objects, worlds of objects, meanings, and universes of discourse with the process of social interaction is the basis for understanding differences between and changes in the modes of life of different human groups. The sets of common objects built up through and within the

social interaction in one group or society may be very different from those formed in others; this is precisely what is represented by what we speak of as "cultural differences." As the defining process (which is exactly what symbolic interaction is) undergoes change, new sets of common objects emerge with new correlative sets of activity.

It follows from our discussion that social interaction on the symbolic level must be seen as a vast defining process in which the meanings of objects are being established, affirmed, or revised through the interplay of indications and responses. In the course of this process, new objects may emerge; old objects may disappear, ceasing to be designated; existing objects may take on a new character by acquiring a different meaning; and other objects may persist without change by virtue of the fact that their given meanings are continually being affirmed and reaffirmed by people in their interaction. In a genuine sense, the state or "being" of all human objects is tenuous; they are continuously subject to definition and redefinition in the interaction between people. If they are affirmed and reaffirmed in their meanings, they continue with a fixed character. If they undergo changes in meaning through new indications and divergent responses, they acquire a different character. If people in their interaction make radically new designations—as they do in the case of new doctrines, inventions, problems, or political or moral considerations—new objects will emerge in their lives. Objects should *not* be thought of as detached things stored up in an outside world, but should be seen as having their existence in the process of social interaction, in which their character and fate are determined by the definition and redefinition to which they are subject.

In this sense, all objects have careers or histories. They come into existence with meanings formed by symbolic interaction, they maintain themselves to the extent to which these meanings are reaffirmed in interaction, and they undergo change as new meanings are given to them in interaction. They disappear when people cease to designate them. Objects usually spend the major part of their careers in a state of steady or fixed meaning, or perhaps more accurately a series of such states, but over time they may undergo remarkable transformations. One merely has to think of the career of celestial stars from at least one early conception of them as lanterns hung in the evening sky to their conception by present-day astronomers as bodies of gases undergoing nuclear transformation. It is of some interest to note that objects most certain to undergo transformation are precisely those that are targets of scientific study. In the sweep of the cultural history of any people, it is easy to detect the transformation of objects over time. These casual observations merely highlight from another perspective the fact that the nature of objects, in the legitimate sense of being objects of action, changes as they are redefined in the life of people.

The obvious correlative is that changes in the life of a group and the activities of the individual take place to the extent to which new objects emerge or the extent to which previous objects take on new meanings. Some change of this sort is continuously in operation in human group life, even in the case of the most settled and custom-bound societies; the elders in such societies can always testify to this. But this change in objects is greatly speeded up in situations that foster new indications and divergence of response to customary indications. Such major happenings as crises; contacts between peoples with different sets of objects; the extension of the channels of communication, leading to the presentation of new definitions; the formation of new groups in a society, with the inevitable consequence of new forms of interaction within their own ranks—all these present situations in which both incitation and pressure arise to form new objects. In ways such as these, people change their worlds and come to live in new ones. The process of social change lies in the process of social interaction. The conditions that initiate changes in social interaction are obviously of the greatest importance; but scholars commit a capital error if they merely consider on one hand such initiating conditions and on the other the new objects and forms of behavior that come into existence. One has to include in the analysis the process of interaction itself, since it is in and through this process that we form the objects that become the anchor points for new lines of conduct.

Let us summarize briefly at this point. The world of action of human beings is made up of multitudinous objects—physical objects like a hammer or a wheel, social objects like a politician or a spouse, abstract objects like compassion or monetary inflation, in short, everything that can be designated. The “nature” of every object consists of the meaning it has for the person for whom it is an object. This meaning is given by the way in which the person is prepared to act toward the object. This preparation to act is formed in response to the defining actions of others whose roles the person must take in fitting an action to their actions; the person comes to designate and identify objects in response to their designations and identifications. We are thus given an analysis in which *all objects are social products*, in the vital sense that the meaning that gives each one of the objects its particular character emerges out of the process of interaction between people.

Mead’s treatment of objects has a number of important and provocative implications for the study of human conduct. Several of them are of special relevance to current work in the social and psychological sciences. The following discussion will help to bring out more clearly the significance of Mead’s analysis.

The first implication stems from the fact that action is toward objects. Human beings may *react* to stimuli, in the legitimate sense of having a response evoked or released by a stimulus, but they *act* toward objects. Objects are “objectives” in

that, as explained, they stand over against the subject or the actor and become focal points to which attention and action are directed. Action toward them is based on their meaning for the actor. It follows that if one wishes to catch and understand the activity of human beings, both individually and collectively, it is necessary to identify the objects toward which the activity is directed and to make this identification in terms of how the objects appear to the acting people. This may seem to be a trivial truism, yet it sets squarely a fundamental task that is involved in the study of human conduct. This basic premise is ignored to an astonishingly large extent in current studies of individual and group action. It is very common, indeed, for students, in viewing the action under study, to pay little regard to the objects toward which the action is directed. It is even more common, should they give attention to the objects of the action, to identify them in terms of how they appear to the students instead of in terms of how they appear to the person or persons who are acting. We will discuss shortly the important methodological problem posed by this matter. At this point we merely wish to stress the implication of Mead's analysis, namely, that in studying human action (not reaction), students should view it through the eyes of those whose action it is. Since human action is organized and directed toward objects on the basis of how these objects are seen by those acting, it is necessary for the student to identify these objects as they appear to the actors. This is equivalent to putting oneself in the role of the actor and seeing his line of action from his point of view; or, if one is studying the life of a group, it means placing oneself inside their world and seeing their objects from their point of view. To study the conduct of people toward one another in any of the countless situations in which they are involved, it is necessary to ascertain what kind of objects they are to each other. While this simple point would seem to be self-evident, it is repeatedly ignored in sociological and psychological studies.

Indeed, in this matter we encounter a methodological problem of the greatest significance, which we may note as a second implication of Mead's treatment. The dominant mode of study or research in current social and psychological science favors an approach markedly alien to what is implied by Mead's analysis of objects. The prevailing approach, under the guise of "objectivity," encourages students—indeed frequently requires them—to shun inquiry into how the subjects under study view the objects toward which they are acting. Students' position as supposedly neutral observers, as usually conceived, signifies that their task is to identify the actors, the things toward which they are acting, and the nature of the action in which they engage. These three items constitute in large measure the basic data students have to treat—the data to be related to presumed "causal" factors or correlated with other items. In carrying out this task, students may

unwittingly fall into a vicious type of subjectivity. Their position as neutral, outside observers can easily lead them to identify the objects toward which the actors are acting, not in terms of how these objects appear to the actor, but instead in terms of how they appear to the students. Yet, obviously, the actors act toward the objects in terms of the meaning the objects have for them and not in terms of the meaning the objects have for the observers. Observers or scholars frequently commit this error in a roundabout manner—by inferring the nature of the objects of the action from the observed action. But this inference, being made from the outside point of view of the observers, runs the risk of being an erroneous attribution; it would be correct only in the event that the perspective of the observers happened to coincide with the point of view of the actors. This coincidence should not be taken for granted by observers and scholars. Careful efforts should be made to ascertain how in fact the actors see the objects toward which their actions are directed. Such an admonition is especially in order since sociological or psychological scholars are highly likely to study individuals and groups outside their own areas of familiar association; the probability is high that such individuals and groups will live and act in worlds of objects significantly different from their own.

The execution of effective studies of human conduct thus calls for the cultivation of skill on the part of students in placing themselves in the role of those whose action they are studying. By and large, current modes of research in the social and psychological sciences, as well as the ways students train in their use, do not foster such skill in role-taking; indeed, they make students distrustful of resorting to its use. The emphasis placed on securing data that are “objective,” standardized, and preferably amenable to quantification leads in another direction. There is no necessary reason why this should be the case since the admonition of Mead’s scheme, in this respect, is only that the data to be used for objective and standardized treatment should first be gathered from the standpoint of the actors. However, the stress given to “objective” data and to an “objective” posture has unfortunately discouraged researchers from seeking to take the roles of those whose conduct they are studying. We should also note that current research training conspicuously neglects programs aiming deliberately to nurture the ability to take the roles of human beings and human groups. Despite the central importance of this ability in the study of human conduct, little attention is given to cultivating and maturing it compared with what is done in the case of other research skills. Essentially nothing has been done to develop a protocol for the deliberate training of this capacity, although the problem and task beg for attention. This is not the place to discuss further this highly important yet markedly neglected area of training set by the simple thesis that people act toward

objects on the basis of the meaning of such objects for them. We need merely note that Mead's thesis poses a methodological concern of prime significance.

Another significant implication of Mead's analysis of objects is the approach it outlines for the study and analysis of the operating organization or makeup of human individuals and human groups. There are, of course, many varieties of schemes advanced to "catch" the makeup or "personality" of the human being as an acting organism, such as those couched in terms of drives, motives, sentiments, attitudes, beliefs, and goals. Similarly, different schemes are used to depict the organization of acting groups, such as norms, values, interests, and goals. The assumption behind such schemes is that if one is able to identify the operating organization of the individual or the group, one would be able to understand and forecast the behavior of the individual or group. We shall see much later in this book, after a fuller consideration of Mead's thought, that this assumption needs a very important qualification because of the need to account for the situations in which action occurs; a knowledge of the functioning organization is insufficient to account for action. However, the operating organization of the individual or group is highly significant in terms of being a *preparation to act* rather than being an assurance of what the action will be. So viewed, the operating organization of the individual or group can be approached fruitfully in the light of Mead's analysis of objects. This analysis, as we have seen, recognizes that the individual or group has an organization that stands over against, and corresponds to, the world of objects in which each carries on its activities. There is essentially a one-to-one correspondence between the tendencies to act on the one hand, and on the other hand, the objects to which action is to be directed. To identify these tendencies and to ascertain their relation to each other is equivalent to identifying the functioning organization of the individual or of the group. It is also equivalent to identifying the organization of the individual's or group's world. How the individual or group is prepared to act is set by this organization. Accordingly, this organization is precisely the operating organization one would wish to identify if one is interested in human conduct. How is this identification to be made? The organization consists of tendencies to act toward objects. Yet it is exceedingly difficult through direct study to get at tendencies to act; one does not really know what to look for. However, an indirect approach is clearly available—one leading pointedly to the tendencies to act. This indirect approach is suggested by the fact that, as we have seen, the tendencies to act correspond to the meaning the object has for the individual. Thus, to determine that meaning is to catch the tendencies. In turn, the line to follow in order to ascertain the meaning is that of securing accounts from the individual that describe or depict the object as it appears to him or her—especially accounts of how he or she uses the object or would act

toward it. In other words, one would work backward from the object to its meaning and thence to the tendencies.

Such an approach is essentially a reversal of that used in current research to get at the organizational makeup of the individual or group when that makeup is conceived in terms of tendencies to act. The character of the current approach is neatly revealed in the study of "attitudes," which, incidentally, are most frequently defined as "tendencies to act." Current studies of attitudes posit an object toward which attitudes exist and then seek to have the respondent indicate his opinions or feelings toward the object by checking predevised items. In this approach, the scholar who makes the study selects the object, defines it by choosing and posing the items to be checked, gets judgments from the respondent about the object in place of ascertaining how the object appears to the respondent, and further limits the range and lines of such judgments. The approach is significantly different from one that would seek to ascertain the meaning of the object for the respondent. To address the meaning an object has for the respondent, it is necessary to place the object in the different contexts in which it appears in the experience of the respondent and seek to determine how the object is viewed in these different contexts. To ascertain these views usually requires probing into the lines of experience of the respondent, getting the respondent to elaborate on initial responses by directing attention to new facets of the object. In the case of many objects, particularly those likely to be under study, portions of their meaning will not be clear even to the respondent, much less to the student. To get the meaning usually requires exploratory inquiry into how the object is set inside the experience of the respondent. All too frequently, respondents themselves are not aware of how they are prepared to act toward the object and, accordingly, much of the meaning of the object to them may be vague and inarticulate. The meaning of the object, very frequently, has to be dug out; this is done not by asking respondents' opinions, feelings, or preferences on predevised items but by having respondents survey reflectively their experiences with the object in its various contexts. The problem of how to ferret out the meaning of objects to individuals and groups is another methodological topic of grave importance posed by Mead's scheme. While a variety of scattered observations are available on this topic, it is clear that no studied efforts have been undertaken to develop this line of research procedure.

In my judgment, the most significant implication of Mead's analysis of objects is its challenge to the conventional doctrine of "stimulus-response," which dominates thought in the psychological and social sciences. The concept of "object" as analyzed by Mead is significantly different from the "stimulus" as usually conceived; and, correspondingly, activity toward objects is markedly different from



response to stimuli. The conventional stimulus is an agent impinging on receptor nerve endings, initiating a neural process that spreads along afferent nerves to the central nervous system and thence along efferent nerves to muscles and glands. The scheme is represented diagrammatically as follows: stimulus  $\rightarrow$  neural organization  $\rightarrow$  response. Under this scheme the stimulus has an intrinsic character (its stimulus quality), which coerces a response, with the nature of the response being dependent on the neural organization. Thus, if one can identify the nature of the stimulus, the nature of the organizational makeup of the organism, and the nature of the response, one has all the elements necessary for analysis, explanation, and the formulation of a scientific proposition. One can say that, given a certain state of organization on the part of the organism, a stimulus impinging on the organism will evoke a definitive response; if on repeated applications the stimulus is the same, and if the state of organization remains constant, the response will be the same. This relation provides the basic formula for handling and analyzing conduct; that is to say, under given conditions a stimulus "*a*" impinging on an organism in a given state of receptivity and responsiveness "*b*" will induce a given response "*x*." The aim of study is to isolate such relations between stimulus, organism, and response. Under this scheme, behavior or conduct is *reaction*, the animal or human organism is a *reacting organism*, and the stimulus is an agent that evokes, indeed compels, the response. It should be noted that in applying the stimulus-response scheme to human behavior, it is customary practice to identify as stimuli the array of things Mead treats as objects, and similarly to view as response the activities directed toward such objects.

Mead's scheme for viewing and analyzing human conduct stands in marked contrast to the stimulus-response conception. This will be seen clearly after the full structure of his thought has been presented. At this point, our interest is confined to contrasting the nature of objects with that of stimuli. As Mead's analysis brings out, an object does not have a character that resides intrinsically in its makeup. Instead, it has a character, or meaning, conferred on it by the way in which the individual is prepared to act toward it; this difference, in itself, puts an object in a markedly different category from a stimulus.<sup>3</sup> Further, an object differs from a stimulus in that an object represents a checking of immediate response in contrast to the evocative release induced by a stimulus; an object, during the time it is noted or designated, is always held in a state of suspension. Finally, and of paramount importance, an object is something toward which one *acts* instead of something, as in the case of a stimulus, to which one *reacts*. By noting and designating an object, the individual is put in the position of organizing and directing action to it, in place of automatically responding to it. If one is jabbed unexpectedly by a needle, one will likely respond with a quick withdrawal

movement and probably with some sort of exclamation; if one knows one is about to be so jabbed, as in the case of an inoculation by a doctor, one may control oneself so as not to flinch or cry out. Making an object of something thus permits one to *organize* or direct conduct toward it instead of merely reacting to it. Here we clearly part company with the sequence posited by the stimulus-response scheme. Instead of having a self-contained character that "touches off" or evokes a definitive reaction, the object has a character imparted by the actor, and that character allows the actor to construct action toward it. Indeed, this is precisely the reason Mead's conception of the object is so significant. One can do something with regard to an object instead of merely reacting to it; one can inspect it, analyze it, evaluate it, communicate with others about it, decide how to use it, plan out a line of action toward it, and govern oneself with regard to it. It should be borne in mind that this is true in the case of any object—whether it is inert material like a brick, alive like a plant or animal, abstract like a philosophical premise, simple like a toothpick, or complex like the financial structure of a huge corporation. In noting any one of these things, in holding it before oneself as a matter of attention, one is in a position to construct lines of action toward it. The object serves as a focal point for the organization and direction of conduct instead of being an impingement that evokes or releases a reaction. This is a markedly different scheme for viewing and analyzing conduct. Its consequences for social research and for the formulation of scientific propositions are extensive and momentous. We shall have occasion later to discuss some of these consequences that flow from Mead's analysis of objects.

There is another implication of Mead's treatment of objects that deserves a few words of comment—an implication chiefly of practical importance. Under his scheme, as we have seen, an individual's objects are formed and transformed by the way in which others define the individual's actions toward the objects. This recognition presents the general formula for changing human behavior, such as developing desired lines of conduct on the part of individuals or groups. The task is that of having such individuals or groups form the appropriate set of objects that stand for, or correspond to, the desired lines of conduct. In turn, since objects are created by the defining indications and responses of others, the task becomes that of organizing the indications and responses in such a way as to lead to the formation of the desired objects. This procedure is obviously implicit in vast varieties of ways employed in human society to change the conduct of individuals or groups; various kinds of defining action are directed toward them to get them to redirect their conduct. In recent times this procedure has been given some sophistication in "scientific" efforts to develop desired forms of human behavior by structuring the situations in which people are placed. The

underlying idea is that by arranging the ways in which others act toward one in such situations, the individual will be led to form conduct along desired lines. The value of Mead's scheme as applied to this matter lies in its emphasis on the nature of the interaction that may take place in these efforts. One cannot assume that the individual or group will interpret or define the structured situation in the way it appears to the person who is setting or staging the situation. The individual may interpret the gestures of others in ways that do not correspond to the intended interpretation and, accordingly, may form objects different from those desired. The frequency with which this happens in contrived efforts to change behavior by structuring situations calls attention to the importance of knowing what is happening in the process of interaction. The big danger lies in taking such interaction for granted. Instead of assuming that because the situation is ostensibly structured in a given way, those who are in it will have the expected type of experience, it is necessary to ascertain what objects the participants are making of each other and how they are defining each other's gestures. Behind the facade of the situation as it appears to the administrator or student, a significantly different process of indication and interpretation may be taking place. Mead's analysis of the formation of objects stresses the importance of knowing what is actually taking place in the process of interaction.

After discussing Mead's treatment of objects, we shall have occasion to present a more precise picture of their place in human action. It is sufficient at this point to note that, under Mead's scheme, the activities that make up the life of a human group and of its members are necessarily focused on objects and get their direction and character from the meaning of the objects. The objects constitute the operative world, environment, or milieu of the group or the individual; they need to be identified in terms of their meaning in order for one to characterize properly and understand the given instances of human action being studied. Objects are social creations in the vital sense that their respective meanings are formed through the defining process that takes place in social interaction. In this process, new objects emerge, and previous objects are transformed as they acquire different meaning. Social change in the life of a group and in the makeup of the individual resides in this formation of new objects and transformation of old objects.

## Notes

1. There is another level in the formation of objects that is added by self-interaction—a matter we shall discuss later. In having a self, a person is able to respond to and define his or her own actions; thus, the person may develop meanings and construct objects of his or her own. This extension of the process of the social interaction need not concern us here.

2. I am omitting from this discussion of "objects" the lengthy analysis undertaken by Mead of the nature of physical objects, in which he comes to grips with the question of whether such objects exist with a self-constituted character ascertained through progressive scientific study. Mead's contribution to this epistemological problem is of high importance. But it is of no particular relevance to our present discussion, which centers around the matter of human conduct. Our point—derived from Mead—is simply that people act toward objects, including physical objects, on the basis of their meaning or how the objects appear to them. The appearance or meaning of the object to the person may be very different indeed from the composition of the object as determined through scientific analysis. A table may be a system of subatomic particles from the standpoint of physical science, yet it is scarcely likely to be viewed or treated as such in using it for an evening dinner. Since our concern is with human conduct, we can forego consideration of the epistemological problem and restrict ourselves to the recognition that people act toward objects on the basis of the meaning the objects have for them.

3. It is legitimate to speak of the preparation to act (i.e., the tendencies to act) as being set off or aroused by something, whatever it may be, that is genuinely a stimulus or set of stimuli. But it is not the object, as such, that arouses the preparation to act toward it; instead it is the preparation to act that establishes the object. This is not mere wordplay. The distinction is significant in emphasizing that the object appears as such (i.e., is perceived and recognized as an object) only as a consequence of a stimulation of the tendencies to act toward it; obviously, the recognition or perception of the object, as such, does not precede the incitation of such tendencies to act but follows after such incitations. What follows from the preparation to act should not be confused with whatever it may be that arouses that preparation.

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## Formation

WE ARE NOW IN A POSITION to consider Mead's treatment of the "self." Mead's conception of the self is the core of his social-psychological thought. It is the key to understanding his analyses of social action, the social makeup of the individual, and human society.

The concept of the "self" as revealed in the literature of the past three centuries is shrouded in vagueness, ambiguity, and inconsistency. As a reflection of this condition, the concept has confused and uncertain standing in present-day psychological and social sciences. Many scholars regard it as an esoteric idea that has no place in any realistic or "scientific" consideration of human action; it is for them at best a metaphysical, philosophical, or theological conception that should be ignored in the serious task of reducing human behavior to hard and solid elements. Many other scholars use the concept in a casual and naive way, retaining much of the vagueness and ambiguity to which the term has historically lent itself. Others, in the interest of having an exact term, have given it an arbitrary content. Few scholars can be said to have developed their ideas of the self as a result of careful empirical observation and reflection. Mead is one of the few scholars to have done so. His conception has emerged out of his concern with the empirical analysis of human behavior rather than from a handling of metaphysical problems. His interest and treatment were empirical in the sense of making careful and reflective observation of the self in the firsthand richness of everyday life rather than employing contrived psychological experiments or using specialized instruments of so-called empirical research. Mead took his own and others' experiences as his subject matter and brought an acute and gifted mind to bear on them. His conception of the self is intimately related to everyday experience.

This is seen most clearly in Mead's initial identification of the self. He sees it, in the first instance, as being merely the object that the individual is to himself or herself. Obviously, human beings can, and do, think of themselves as being a given kind of object. The human being may see himself or herself as male or female, young or old, rich or poor, married or unmarried, as belonging to this or

that ethnic group, as a banker or a homemaker, as a scholar or an athlete, as one who has suffered misfortune, is respected, or ill-treated, as one who has a mission, and so on. The point here is not that the individual is necessarily any one or several of these different kinds of persons, but that the individual *sees* himself or herself as one or more of them. The individual thus makes an object of himself or herself and by doing so, acquires an ability to act toward himself or herself much as with regard to anything else that becomes an object for the individual. The individual can designate himself or herself as a certain kind of person, see himself or herself in the terms of the meaning given by that designation, address himself or herself in terms of that meaning, and organize action toward himself or herself in terms of that meaning. All of the features of behavior we have specified previously in speaking of objects apply to the object the human being makes of himself or herself. Before tracing out more fully the import of having a self in this simple sense of being an object to oneself, it is necessary to see how Mead analyzes the way one may become an object to oneself. This is a very important part of Mead's scheme.

The human infant or very young child is not an object to itself. While in the eyes of others it acts as a baby, it doesn't recognize itself as a baby. It doesn't see itself as someone who is helpless, gets sick, cries a lot, spends a lot of time sleeping, is neglected at times, who can be a source of irritation to its parents, who can be funny, or who can arouse a lot of attention. The human infant or young child is typically a very active organism, subject to a welter of internal and external stimulations and responding to them with vigorous behavior. But it does not perceive itself as an actor amid such experience and action. A problem is set as to how the young child comes to see itself as an object and, thus, to act toward itself as an object. This is the initial and most crucial question to be answered in seeking to explain how a self comes into existence. The answer, for Mead, is not to be sought in a process of physiological maturation, but in the process of social interaction. To make an object of itself, the child has, logically, to get out of itself and view itself from the outside. How can this seemingly paradoxical feat be achieved? Mead's answer is that it is done by taking the roles of others and seeing and addressing oneself through these roles. Other persons, in whose positions one imaginatively places oneself, serve as the points from which one can approach oneself. One makes an object of oneself by addressing oneself from the standpoint of others. Mead identifies two fundamental stages through which the child passes in forming an object of itself, each of which represents a different form of role-taking. He designates these as the "play" stage and the "game" stage. An explanation of their character will clarify what is meant by approaching oneself from the standpoint of others.

The play stage of role-taking is exemplified in the play of children when they cast themselves in different roles, such as mother, nurse, cowboy, space pilot, storekeeper, and so forth. In such play the child places itself overtly in the given part, engaging in activity characteristic of it. In so doing, Mead notes, the child puts itself in the position of being able to act back toward itself from the standpoint of the part it is playing. Thus, a little girl "playing mother" may address herself as her mother ordinarily addresses her, talk to herself as her mother does, order herself to do this or that as her mother is accustomed to do, or reprimand herself in the manner that her mother reprimands her. This represents the way in which a child, while taking roles in its play, is placed in a position of being able to approach itself as an object. The same result may be achieved without taking a role in the overt manner so evident in the play of children. In association, for instance, with a parent, brother, sister, playmate, or anyone acting toward it, the child comes to take the role of the other in the sense of grasping what the other person expects, demands, requests, or intends to do toward it. In such instances the child enters into the position of the other person, even though it may not take the role in outward display. In entering into another's position, the child is placed, as in play, in the position of approaching itself from the standpoint of the other.

Mead's view is that the early life of the child consists largely of such role-taking, in the course of which it is approaching itself as an object. In this manner the self as an object is initially formed.<sup>1</sup> The characteristic feature, however, of this kind of role-taking is that the roles taken are discrete, episodic, and largely unconnected—with a corresponding diversity and lack of connection between the objects the child makes of itself. Something more is needed in order for the child to form an object of itself that embraces large areas of association, has constancy in diverse situations, and shows continuity over time. This type of self-object, which many scholars treat as a sense of personal identity, is a product of a type of role-taking that Mead locates in the "game" situation. The term "game" is merely a convenient label and, as the following discussion will show, is not to be construed in a restricted sense.

The game situation is characterized by organized activity among a number of participants, as for example in the American game of baseball. In the ongoing activity, participants are required to fit their own actions into the diverse yet organized actions of their associates. At any point in the game at which a participant has to act, the participant has to take into consideration what a number of the other players are doing at the time. Accordingly, Mead contends, the participant has to take a number of roles simultaneously. The participant has to anticipate what they each are going to do and to grasp what they expect him or her to do.



In this sense, the participant is taking the role of a group, represented by the organized ongoing activity of others to which he or she has to adjust his or her own activity. This type of role-taking, while neatly revealed in the context of a game, takes place in any kind of collective situation in which organized joint activity is in process; thus it is called for in the home, in the store, on the playground, or in any institutional setting. The child is ushered into such kinds of situations, beginning initially with a very limited capacity to take such group roles but enlarging this capacity to embrace wider numbers of people implicated in the organized group activity. Thus, the mature baseball player takes the roles not only of the other players but of the officials, spectators, sports reporters, and even a large outside public.

There is no need in the present book to consider Mead's provocative remarks with regard to the kind of neural organization that allows the human being to take the role of a number of individuals simultaneously or the role of a group. What is important is that this type of role-taking takes place. In line with Mead's thesis, this form of role-taking enables one to approach or address oneself from the standpoint of a collectivity or, more exactly, from the standpoint of an organized context of interrelated activities of others. In approaching oneself from such a standpoint, one is in a position to form an object of oneself that has organization, unity, and continuity. As a baseball player, one becomes to oneself a complex object having to engage in the specified activities that mark the game, such as filling a specialized part, say, playing third base, or being a superior or mediocre player, an amateur or professional, a performer before others, and a member of a given team. In taking the roles of the diverse people implicated in the game, one is in a position to weave together their different perspectives of one into a complex object of oneself. Such an object has organization (although it may vary in degree and form), unity (although diverse aspects of it may be emphasized from time to time), and continuity (although it may obviously change over time). As one enters into new and wider areas of organized group life and takes the roles of those implicated in those areas, one forms additional objects of oneself and is in a position to merge these objects together in more transcending objects of oneself.

In this connection, Mead's concept of the "generalized other" emerges as an idea of telling importance. As the term signifies, the "generalized other" is an abstract "other" embodying what is common to a class of acting human beings; more precisely, it embodies the organized group activity common to a class of social settings. It is exemplified on a low level by what is commonly spoken of as "social roles," such as husband, mother, priest, soldier, judge, or political boss. Each of these roles stands for an organized complex of behavior expected of the

actor; it also stands for a complementary pattern of behavior on the part of those who accept and address an individual in the given role. The social role represents a texture of joint activity or a form of organized group activity; it is an abstraction or generalization of features that mark a class of concrete instances of joint, or reciprocal, social activity. However, Mead's concept of the "generalized other" goes far beyond such conventionally defined social roles. It may embrace abstract representations of organized group action that do not appear in the form of conventionally defined social roles. Thus individuals may abstract out of their group relations an organized pattern of relationship of others toward them that has no name and that conforms to no group prescription. For example, one may form, on the basis of one's knowledge of different nations and peoples today, a perspective of one's position as a world citizen. This perspective, while representing an organized relationship between one and others, may not conform to a conventionally defined role or carry any established social prescription as to type of conduct, rights, or obligations. For Mead, the "generalized others" formed by the individual, or abstracted out of the individual's group experiences, have the character of the illustration just given rather than the character of conventionally defined roles. Each of us occupies positions in diverse areas of association, with patterns of relationship extending outward from a given position to sets of individuals and groups implicated or connected with it. In taking the roles of the individuals or groups connected with the position, an individual may form a transcending "they" that stands for or embraces in a generalized way such individuals and groups in their relationship to the individual. Such a "they" is what Mead means essentially by a "generalized other." To take the role of a "generalized other" is to approach oneself from the position of an abstract "they" standing in some form of organized relationship to one. Obviously, "generalized others" vary in their coverage, some representing restricted areas of relationship and others standing for far-reaching areas of relationship, even an extended international community. It is important, again, to recognize that "generalized others" need not match social roles as conventionally defined in society.<sup>2</sup> Generalized others, rather than the prescribed social roles that fit inside them, constitute the vital group roles individuals take in the guidance of their conduct.

It is evident from the foregoing discussion that Mead has formulated a conception of "role" that fits his view of the nature of social interaction among human beings. Since, as explained earlier, this interaction necessarily involves the fitting together of individual lines of activity, the individual as an actor has to take the roles of the others to whom the individual's own action is directed. These "others," depending on the situation, may be single individuals, specific groups immediately present, or abstracted groups that extend out over the horizon.

Accordingly, the roles taken may range from that of a specific person to that of a diffuse "they." Through this array of roles, the individual approaches himself or herself and forms objects of himself or herself.

Several features should be noted in the case of this process by which one forms objects of oneself. First, there is an evident correspondence between the objects that individuals make of themselves and the objects that others make of them, although the correspondence may vary greatly in degree. The basis of correspondence exists in the fact that the actions of others constitute necessarily the definitions of one's own action; the degree of variance in the correspondence arises from the fact that the individual, in turn, defines for himself or herself these definitions given by others. Second, the individual does not exist for himself or herself as a single, unified, all-embracing, and invariable object or, in contrast, as merely a disjunctive array of separate objects. For the forms to occur, the individual would have to approach himself or herself in all social situations in exactly the same fashion despite the excessive improbability that others would approach him or her in all situations in the same invariable manner; only the extreme paranoiac who has lost responsiveness in role-taking is likely to approximate this condition. On the reverse side, the individual, in taking the roles of generalized others, is able to form objects of himself or herself that transcend and embrace varieties of separate, discrete objects of himself or herself. The nature of the generalized others and the organization between them explain the degree of integration, unity, and stability of the objects that individuals make of themselves. Third, in approaching himself or herself from the standpoint of a generalized other, the individual puts himself or herself in a position to transcend a given concrete situation and so be freed from its immediate demands. One may, for example, seek to live up to the role of a gentleman in a variety of different situations—the home, the tavern, the business office, the club, the sport contest, the argumentative debate—and thus govern oneself by this generalized other rather than by the ostensible "stimulus" character of the given situation. Thus, in taking the roles of generalized others, the individual is able to introduce organization into his or her world of operation, to develop consistency of action in diverse situations, to form lines of unity in personal makeup, and to offset divergent demands of concrete situations.

## The Significance of Being an Object to Oneself

For Mead, the ability of human beings to become objects to themselves lies at the center of human action. Of the many significant consequences flowing from this ability are several that deserve special consideration.

One obvious consequence is that the individual may become the focal point of his or her own action and concern. An organism incapable of becoming an object to itself is caught up in the mere interplay of its organic makeup and its environmental pressures; its action can be analyzed in terms of its organic components meeting and responding to environmental stimulations. In contrast to such a type of organism, human beings are in the position of noting themselves, weaving patterns of action toward themselves, becoming preoccupied with themselves, guiding themselves, restraining themselves, and controlling themselves. It is not necessary to recite here the variety and complexity of ways in which the human being may enter into his or her own life or, indeed, even to note that he or she becomes the major object in his or her world of objects. These would be banal observations. But such obvious observations should spotlight what students are far too prone to ignore, namely, that instead of being merely an organism interacting with its environment, the human being is an organism that interacts with itself. The human organism becomes susceptible to its own discernment, concern, manipulation, direction, and control. This is only possible by being an object to itself. The features of conduct pointed out in our earlier discussion of objects apply in the case of oneself as an object. The self as an object can be noted, defined, judged, approached, handled, and used as the focal point around which to organize diverse actions. No effective analysis can be made of the conduct of the human being or of his or her personal organization without introducing the dimension represented by the fact that the human is an object of his or her own action. A human's actions toward himself or herself permeate that human's actions toward others and affect deeply the character of his or her dispositions, feelings, and thoughts. So far, few students have grasped the full import of this perspective of Mead's scheme.

The most significant consequence of being an object to oneself is that it enables one to engage in interaction with oneself. In being an object to oneself, one can address one's self or act toward it, and, in turn, respond to that approach or action. The means are thereby provided for one to engage in interaction with oneself in a manner similar to one's interaction with others. Just as one makes indications to others in talking or acting toward them, and as one responds in turn to their indications, so may one make indications to oneself and respond to these indications. In short, as Mead would say, by virtue of being objects to themselves, human beings import and incorporate the communicative process as it operates generally between them and other humans in group life. The introduction of this communicative process within us transforms radically our position with regard to our surrounding world and imparts an entirely new character to the formation of our actions. We now confront our world not merely as organisms

sensitized to respond to its various stimulations, but also as organisms equipped to handle and manipulate these stimulations. We are in a position to pick out a given stimulation by designating it to ourselves, checking our immediate response to it, conversing with ourselves about it, and organizing our action toward it in terms of how we defines it through the process of self-indication. Thus, as an example, in experiencing a pain, we may seek to locate and identify it, judge its severity and import, and converse with ourselves as to whether we should just endure it, dismiss it as without significance, apply some homemade remedy to it, report it to others, or consult a doctor about it. It should be clear that in acting in this manner, we are not merely releasing a preorganized act in response to a stimulation; instead, through a process of self-indication, we are *acting toward* the stimulation, making an object of it, seeking to define it, and building up a plan of action toward it. As the illustration suggests, a process of self-interaction lies between the points of stimulation and the forms of terminal behavior. This intervening process is important in its own right. It is not merely a mediatory stage inserted between stimulation and overt response; it is a transforming process that converts stimulation into objects and constructs lines of action. In having ourselves as objects, we human beings thus confront our world of stimulation in a way radically different from that of organisms without selves.

Another significant consequence of being objects to ourselves is that it provides us with a covert area of experience and thus enables us to maintain a private world. Self-communication is peculiarly closed to direct observation by others (the condition that will forever plague and challenge the scientific study of human conduct) and thus offers the means of engaging in a rich variety of actions that do not have to pass muster before the immediate defining responses of others. Such covert actions are spared the immediate restraints and controls exercised by others on perceived overt actions. But, correspondingly, they lose the direct guidance and socializing formation to which overt actions are subject. All of us are familiar with this inner world in the form of our thinking, reveries, planning, rehearsal of past experiences, handling of mortifications and worries, savoring of personal achievements, flights from distasteful tasks, efforts to devise solutions to problems, and formations of judgments of other people and of our situations. For Mead, this rich area of inner life—which constitutes substantially the realm of the “mind”—is fundamentally a social world of happening in which individuals are engaged in making indications to themselves and responding to their indications. In existing as a genuine form of self-interaction, it can scarcely be viewed as a mere play of separate mental elements—such as sensations, feelings, ideas, attitudes, values, and so forth—unlocked from a supposed mental stockroom; it takes the form, instead, of individuals noting and handling elements of their expe-

rience. Nor is this inner world of happening to be regarded as a kind of epiphenomenon to the real actions of people in their association with others. While, as a process of self-interaction, it stands apart from interaction with others, it is intimately related to such social interaction and plays back into it through its products. Obviously, in interacting with themselves in their world of inner experience, individuals are forming and reforming themselves as an object, redefining others, reinterpreting the situations in which others are involved, and thus preparing themselves to enter or withdraw from association with others in diverse ways. Their actions toward others are built up in the arena of their private world.

## The Self as a Process

Up to this point our discussion of the self has centered on its character as an object. But the self may also be viewed as a process. This has already been suggested by previous remarks on self-interaction. The fact that individuals may indicate something to themselves and respond to their indication—or in other words communicate with themselves—signifies an ongoing process rather than a contemplative regarding of themselves as an object. Such a process is continually in operation in conscious life or experience; we are engaged in pointing out things to ourselves, some in the immediate perceptual field and others in terms of future possibilities, seeking to clarify some by further designation, using many as pivots for our developing actions, and in general guiding ourselves by noting this and that and responding to our notations. What we note or designate to ourselves may cover the widest assortment of objects—sidewalks, trees, doors, chairs, animals, children, the approach of a stranger, the remarks of an associate, and the ineptness of our own action. In this process of making indications to ourselves, what we note need not be ourselves at all; that is to say, we need not be designating ourselves to ourselves; indeed, as we all know from our experience, we may engage in long lines of activity in which we do not think of ourselves at all. This observation should help to establish the difference between the self as an object and the “self” as a process. As an object, the self is being designated, as when one notes one is acting clumsily or views oneself as about to undertake a dismaying task. As a process, the self refers to the ongoing process of self-interaction in which one is designating objects to oneself and responding to one’s designations.

In some of his writings, and in many of his class lectures, Mead considered the process of self-interaction as an interaction between the “I” and the “Me.”<sup>3</sup> There is admittedly a considerable band of ambiguity in what Mead means in his use of these two terms. Our discussion here will be limited to pointing out the core character of each of the two concepts and to considering the relation between

them in terms of these core characters. The "I" refers to the human organism in action at any moment, but especially at the points at which the organism is launching itself into action; the "Me" is that action viewed by the organism from the standpoint of a generalized other. The "I" springs from the organic disposition or readiness of the organism to act. The "I" in action is, accordingly, giving expression and release to organic impulse and tendency and is seeking to attain fulfillment or consummation. The "I" stands for the outward thrust of the organism in action—it occupies the position of the subject or the actor in the action. In contrast, the "Me" has the status of an object since it arises when the organism views or approaches itself. The "Me" reflects the attitude of the community since it is viewed through the generalized other. An idea of what is meant by the "I" and the "Me" is conveyed by thinking of one's experience in being insulted. One's disposition may be to lash out in an attack on the person who has made the insult—this represents the "I." In this situation one may see oneself as aroused and ready to attack the person—the self as so seen constitutes the "Me."

The identification of the "I" and the "Me" in Mead's thought becomes significant in terms of their relationship. Mead regards each as responding to the other. The response of the "Me" to the "I" is, as mentioned, in the form of viewing oneself and one's action. This response is of great importance since it lays the basis for checking, guiding, and controlling one's conduct. To see oneself as doing something or about to do something puts one in the position of judging the action or prospective action, of inhibiting or facilitating it as the case may be, of devising a plan of how the action is to proceed, and of controlling the action by the plan. Thus, an insulted man may see himself as swept by anger and may be aware of his impulse to physically attack the person who fired off the insult. Yet in viewing himself from the standpoint of the community, he may recognize that it would be improper or unbecoming to hit the person, or perhaps even to disclose his excited anger. Accordingly, he may project a plan of remaining calm, of speaking politely, and of searching for some cutting remark or gesture that would be allowable in the discourse. And he may proceed to control his action by such a designated plan or discourse. These remarks illustrate Mead's point that the "Me," in playing back on the "I," serves to check, handle, and direct the "I."

The "I," in turn, responds to the "Me." Mead attaches great importance to this response. He views the response of the "I" as being made to the framework placed in it by the "Me," that is, to the plan set up to guide the "I." The "I" may break through the plan, gaining an expression that was not intended or foreseen. Thus, contrary to his intention, the insulted man may disclose his agitated anger by the quiver or stammer in his voice, or to his surprise he may speak with a

calmness and cleverness that far exceeds what he anticipated or thought himself capable of doing. For Mead, as these illustrative remarks suggest, the "I" carries the germ of unpredictability; while the "Me" outlines and structures the situation to which the "I" responds, one cannot be sure what that response will be. One does not have direct control over one's "I" since one can note one's "I" only after it has appeared or begun to express itself; one necessarily lags behind the "I" and can catch it only after it has occurred. One's control over it, consequently, can be exercised only by framing the situation in which it is to operate. Yet, as mentioned, the response of the "I" to the situation may not conform to what is presupposed or intended by the framework set up to guide it. Mead sees this uncertainty or incomplete control of the "I" as an ever recurring source of novelty and innovation in human conduct. All human action carries the potentiality of diverging, in however slight a degree, from the controls and guidance imposed on it. Students disposed to see human society as a vast ordering framework of action may well wish to ponder Mead's views on the response of the "I" to the "Me."

In the forthcoming analysis of the human act, we will have another occasion to consider the self as a process. The important consideration at this point is to see that in Mead's treatment, the human being is portrayed as an organism that is an object to itself, and that by virtue of being a self, the human being is able to interact with itself as it faces the world. Knowledge of self-interaction is basic to an understanding of how the human being fits into and acts in group life.

## Notes

1. There is plenty of evidence that points to an earlier stage and form of role-taking that precedes the play stage with which Mead deals. Its form is obscure, probably because it is an initial and fragmentary fitting of the very young child into the positions of others. It may be observed in the form of crude "imitation" of others by a child, such as holding an open newspaper before its eyes or going through the motions of washing dishes. Such behavior represents unquestionably an early tendency to assume the positions of others. Mead was aware of it although he did not single it out for treatment. This early stage is of unquestioned importance as a gradual cultivation of the ability to take roles and thus is a preparation for the more mature forms of role-taking one observes in the case of the "play stage." Whether the young child approaches itself as an object in this early stage is a matter of doubt. Even though this may happen, its occurrence would be thoroughly in line with Mead's thesis.

2. One of the very provocative and unexploited leads of Mead's scheme is the relation between the "generalized others" formed by the individual and the conventionally defined social roles he is expected to follow. They may differ a great deal. Much of the strain and inner discord individuals experience, especially in modern life, arise from a discrepancy between the generalized others they form and the conventional social roles they are called on to execute. If the discrepancy is severe, serious disintegration may occur to self-organization.



3. It seems clear that Mead did not intend to resolve the process of self-interaction necessarily into interaction between the "I" and the "Me." In his discussions assembled in *The Philosophy of the Act*, the terms "I" and "Me" are not used, although this is precisely where they should have been used and elaborated at some length if they were cardinal concepts in Mead's thought. My opinion is that Mead's discussion of the terms should be viewed as merely revealing a highly important aspect of the process of self-interaction and not as encompassing that process.



THE THEME OF "ACTION" pervades Mead's entire scheme of analysis. Society is seen in terms of action—the fitting together of the lines of activity of individual members. Social structure is seen as differentiated and complementary patterns of activity. The association of the members of society is treated in terms of *interaction*. The individual member is seen as an acting organism. The self is depicted as a process of activity in which the individual is engaged in making indications to himself or herself. Objects—all things of which the individual is aware—are depicted as plans or designs of action. The experience of the person is seen as *experiencing*. These observations point to the position of dominance Mead gives to the motif of action in his perspective and scheme of treatment.

It is appropriate to introduce now his more detailed treatment of the nature of social action. Mead regarded social action as the basic stuff of human society and individual conduct. He took social action as an original datum—as that which is immediately given in perceiving the human group or the human individual. As such, it is the point of departure for the analysis of the group or the individual and the point of return for the assessment or testing of any proposed scheme of analysis. This position stands in contrast to a widespread practice in the social and psychological sciences of substituting for social action some derivative of it. Convenient examples of this latter practice are the common tendency to locate the "essentials" of human society in social structure instead of in the activity that comprises group life, and the similar tendency to set up as an original datum some kind of psychological organization in the individual in place of seeing the individual as an actor engaging in social action. For Mead, the appropriate approach to analysis is a treatment of social action. This treatment must cling closely to social action as we are familiar with it in our experience and immediate observations.

Mead regards the social action of human beings as made up of "acts." He recognizes two classes of acts—the "social act," which involves joint activity on the part of two or more persons, and the "individual act," which belongs to the

single person. The individual act takes place inside the social act. In this chapter we consider the individual act; subsequently, we shall discuss the social act.

The individual act in the case of human conduct is any line of activity the person directs toward an objective. Commonplace examples are going to a restaurant to get a meal, returning to one's home after work, performing a task such as mowing a lawn, going to a door in response to a knock, reading a newspaper, writing a letter, asking someone to do something, responding to a request to do something, taking a trip, brushing one's teeth, getting married, and pursuing an ambition such as to become a physician. Our group life is made up of a countless number of these sorts of acts. They constitute the conduct of the human being during waking life. They comprise the ways in which we each meet our world and represent the ways in which each of us acts inside of the life of our group. The individual act is the natural form of one's conduct. Accordingly, for Mead, it is the appropriate unit for study in the effort to analyze the nature of individual conduct and the nature of the individual as an actor.

Before proceeding to Mead's analysis of the act, it is desirable to note several general characteristics and features of individual acts in order to put the topic in proper perspective. First, individual acts obviously vary from one another along many lines of comparison. Acts may be simple, as in washing one's hands before eating, or complex, as in writing a book; they may be limited to a moment of time, as in restraining a cough, or extend over years, as in undergoing training for a profession; they may be routine and repetitious, or they may be new and original; they may be definite and well charted, as in getting a glass of water to quench one's thirst, or they may be diffuse and rambling, as in endeavoring to satisfy a vague feeling of ennui. Such variability is to be expected, since individual acts cover the scope and diversity of human conduct. Next, we should recognize that small acts may fit inside a larger act and form parts of it; for example, students who direct their career to becoming a medical doctor have to engage in a large variety of smaller acts along the way, such as attending classes, reading books, performing laboratory exercises, applying for internship assignments, and so forth. Another significant commonsense recognition is that acts are subject to interruption and change in the course of their careers. They may be started and abandoned, checked and resumed, shelved and resurrected, nurtured or permitted to wither, bolstered or weakened, encouraged or repressed, protected or allowed to disintegrate. The act may be said to have many points of vulnerability. It is precisely this vulnerability that yields the possibilities for changing and controlling human conduct.

These simple observations help us to form a clearer picture of the nature of the individual act. The act must be distinguished from a "reaction," as in the case

of a reflex. The act presupposes some sort of end or goal the individual is consciously seeking to reach instead of being a preorganized form of behavior that is merely released and carried out unwittingly. While bits of such released actions always enter into the act, it is a grievous mistake to regard the act itself as such a release. Instead, in the case of an individual act, individuals have to orient their behavior by setting some sort of objective, whether immediate or remote, and then seeking to direct their behavior toward the objective. This observation forces one to recognize, further, that an act has a career. The act has a career in that it has a beginning, it is aimed toward an end, it extends over time, the actor has to deal with available means in order to reach the goal, it is subject to interruption, and it has the possibility of diverse development. One can readily see this career characteristic in the case of a large act, such as training oneself for a profession. The aspect of career is present, however, even in the case of a momentary act, such as stifling an impulse to sneeze; one may struggle with the impulse, employ different methods to restrain it, maybe succeed in doing so, or perhaps finally handle the impulse by sneezing into a wadded handkerchief so as to muffle the sound. If one examines any act, for instance those previously mentioned, one will find that, however simple and brief it may be, it has a career. We may note as a final general characteristic that the individual act is self-directed, even though this self-direction takes place inside a framework that imposes limitations on it. The act is self-directed in the sense that actors have to take account of what confronts them, conceive possible lines of activity in moving toward the objective, and make choices and decisions. It is this feature of self-direction, above all, that Mead brings to the forefront in his analysis.

We may use this last remark to highlight what is both unique and central in Mead's treatment of human social action. Mead brings the self into the individual act—again, let it be emphasized—in no mysterious or metaphorical manner. The self is brought into the act in the form of a process of self-interaction, or more exactly, the making of indications to the self. This process is the central and most important mechanism of the human act. Inclusion of this process converts the human act into a line of activity constructed by the individual instead of being an initiating agent. The inclusion of the self-process means, also, that the “elements” of the act—such as motives, images of goals, perception of objects, ideas, feelings, norms, values, situations, and plans of possible actions—are woven into the act instead of being original units out of which the act is compounded. Inclusion of the self-process means, further, that the formation of the act is a process in its own right—one that cannot be ignored, submerged, or reduced to the play of other factors. These general observations, which subsequent analysis will develop in some detail, establish the distinctive way in which Mead views the

act—a view that stands in contrast to the dominant ways in which social action is handled in current social and psychological science. Current approaches in these disciplines are conspicuous in leaving self-interaction out of the picture. Almost all of them are based on the premise that the causes and explanations of the act are to be sought in the condition or factors that initiate the act. Since the difference is of such decisive importance for an understanding of Mead's approach, it is desirable at this point to spell out briefly the way in which human social action, or the act, is handled in the main in contemporary psychological and social science.

Still very dominant in current thought, especially in psychology, is the practice of viewing social action in terms of the stimulus-response formula. The human being is regarded as a responding organism, and the act is regarded as a response to one or more stimuli. Given a certain state of the organism in the form of its sensitivity or neural organization, the stimulus operates to evoke a given response. Under such a scheme, there is no need, indeed no place, for the inclusion of the self. One merely has to identify the responding readiness of the human organism in the given setting, determine the effective stimuli impinging on the human, and note the ensuing behavior. This basic formulation is followed regardless of the number and variety of stimuli introduced or of the complexity posited in the responding mechanism. The formulation holds whether scholars adhere strictly to the neurological level or whether, as our earlier discussion sought to show, they gratuitously extend the concept of stimuli to embrace what Mead speaks of as objects. Under the stimulus-response scheme, action, or the act, is regarded as a product. The task of the scholar is to identify the stimulus or configuration of stimuli thought to call forth the act or bring it into being. The stimulus or configuration is treated as an initiating agent that, given the state of responsiveness of the organism, induces and accounts for the behavior that occurs. Logically, the act is traced back to stimuli.

The other widely held psychological approach to the treatment of social action is what we conventionally term the motivational approach. Under this approach the act is viewed as resulting from some type of generating motive. The motive, whatever it may be, is regarded as launching the human organism into action, sensitizing it to select and respond to certain kinds of stimuli, shaping its perceptual and cognitive processes, and propelling it toward a goal set by the nature of the motive. The act, accordingly, is to be explained by the given motive it expresses. In this approach, as in the stimulus-response scheme, there is no place or need for a self; the motive, in moving the individual along toward a goal and in guiding the individual in the use of facilities to achieve it, is regarded as sufficient to carry out the act and to account for it. The reader should be

reminded that this characterization is not changed by lodging motives in an ego or "self," as is done, for instance, in speaking of ego-needs. In Mead's use of the term, the ego is not a self. It would be a self only in becoming an object to itself and entering into communicative interaction with itself. Schemes that account for the act in terms of motives or ego-needs do not treat the ego as being an object to itself, nor do they view motives as objects individuals designate to themselves and handle in the light of the designations. In this fundamental sense, motivational schemes do not provide for a process of self-interaction in the formation of the act.

Finally, it should be noted that conventional sociological schemes that seek to account for the act in terms of societal factors also omit the self or the self-process. Insofar as social action is regarded as caused by such factors as status demands, social roles, the pull of reference groups, and the control exerted by social norms and social values, there is no need to include the self in the analysis of the act. Since the act is treated as a response to, or an expression of, the given societal factor, the designation and characterization of the societal factor is taken as sufficient for analysis and explanation.

These three dominant conventional approaches treat the act, or the social action of the individual, as a product of an initiating agent—a given stimulus, motive, or societal factor, as the case may be. It matters not what stimuli are sought, how motives may be conceived, or what particular set of societal factors are used, or indeed how combinations of these three types of factors may be formulated; the act is treated as a result of a given set of agents. Thus the identification of the initiating agent or agents is both the object of study and the source of explanation of the act. To link the act as a completed product to the agent believed to cause it is the task of research inquiry and of scholarly interpretation. Under this general approach, a process of self-interaction is not seen as taking place in the formation of the act or, if seen, is ignored as having no significance. Instead, the human being is viewed merely as a responding organism, and human behavior is treated as the consequence or work of the initiating agent to which the human responds.

Mead's view of the individual act stands in distinct contrast to this conventional conception. He sees the act as a development rather than a product, as something constructed rather than released, as something formed through a special process of its own rather than something produced by an initiating agent, and as something forged by the individual instead of something called forth by a factor or factors playing on the individual. This different character of the act, or of social action, seen by Mead arises from the fact that in possessing a self (i.e., in being an object to oneself), one can make indications to oneself and act on the

basis of the indications. As an actor, the human being is not a mere organism responding to factors playing upon it. It is, instead, a self confronting and acting toward a world of indicated objects. In having a self, one is in a position to observe one's own action, to note facets and details of it, and to guide oneself by those notations and by the way in which one defines them. In this important sense, human beings stand over against their own act and act back on it in the course of its formation to guide its progress. In a genuine and not metaphorical fashion, humans enter into their own act, perceiving this or that detail of it, judging what they note, and on the basis of the judgment, orienting themselves for the next of succeeding steps in the act. Instead of being merely a medium through which the act unfolds or rolls along in response to an initiating agent, individuals, by virtue of designating to themselves features of the act, can intercede in the act and guide its course. In this sense, the act ceases to be a pattern of behavior formed by its initiating agent and becomes instead a line of activity forged through a process of self-indication.

The account just given may seem remote from actual human conduct as one sees it and experiences it. However, its validity can be seen easily by human beings who care to view any one of their acts. They will see that they observe features of what they are doing, noting and judging details of their ongoing action and using these observations to guide or build up their act. To illustrate the point, let us consider a simple kind of individual act common to all of us—the ordinary set of experiencing hunger and eating to satisfy the hunger. This simple act is conventionally explained as follows: the hunger launches the individual into a quest for food that, when found, leads the individual to consume it. This line of analysis, however elaborated by adding such elements as the physiological contraction of the walls of the stomach, neural processes, sensitization to stimuli, and the perception of facilitating and inhibiting objects, fails to take into account the construction of the act that the process of self-indication brings about. A more accurate account of the act discloses that the human being has to note and judge a variety of aspects of an action and things bearing on it and has to organize an action on the basis of such indications. Thus, in the case of the simple action under consideration, a woman, for example, first of all has to note that she is hungry. Unless she makes this identification of herself, she would not be in a position to carve out a plan of action designed to get food; she would merely be restless. When she recognizes her hunger, she then has to assess her condition and situation in order to sketch out a possible line of behavior; she may indicate to herself that it is not a proper time to eat and so reconcile herself to waiting, or she may remind herself that she is on a diet and prepare herself to skip a meal, or she may recognize that she has other tasks to perform that take precedence, or

she may decide to proceed to get food. But a decision to get food merely sets the stage for a new series of indications she must make to herself in order to secure the food. She will have to point out to herself where the food is—she may think of food in the refrigerator, or she may ask some member of the household to prepare a meal, or she may consider the possibility of going to a restaurant, taking into account the state of the weather, the amount of money she has available to spend, and whether she chose the appropriate restaurant. Following the decision of where to secure food, she has to continue to guide her line of action by noting and considering other matters such as what food to eat, its amount, and so forth. As these homely experiences suggest, human beings build up their action, step by step, in even such a simple matter of dealing with hunger and arranging to satisfy it.

Scrutiny of any act will show that human beings are engaged in a running sequence of making notations to themselves of details of their action, of aspects of their own condition, of features of their situation, and of prospects of their action as they project it forward in their imagination in terms of what they might do. The act falls inside the process of self-indication. As a consequence, it takes on the character of being forged or constructed by individuals on the basis of what they note, take into account, evaluate, and decide. It is highly important to recognize that in the process of building up our act, we are acting back on ourselves or, more properly put, we are acting toward those aspects of our act that we note and take into account. In noting any aspect of our developing act, we are making an object of it, defining it, and using our definition of it to guide the formation of the remaining part of the act. Thus, when noting the "motive" of our act, such as our hunger, we are in the position to make a given object of it or define it in different ways; we may view it as something to be satisfied immediately; something to be held in abeyance, suppressed, or ignored; something before which we are helpless; or something to be nursed along or transformed. Similarly, we may form an object of a possible goal of our act, judge it, find it to be wanting, revise it, build it into a more entrancing image, cast it aside as impractical, and supplant it with a new goal. In like manner, we may view any aspect of our act in between the "motive" and the goal, judging it, reinterpreting it, correcting it, rejecting it as a possibility, and supplanting it with something else. To sum up, by virtue of being a self, the human being can act back on the "cause," the means, and the end of any act while it is in progress. By acting back on it, the human being pieces the act together, defining it, checking it, reinforcing it, guiding it, sometimes struggling with it, but necessarily constructing it. The extent to which the act is constructed or needs construction will vary, sometimes enormously, with different kinds of acts. Taking a seat in a room may require little more than



simply noting an empty chair, whereas an act of extricating oneself from a black-mailing predicament may need very elaborate and flexible construction. But, irrespective of whether the human act is simple or complex, it is necessarily formed through a process of self-indication.

To round out the picture of how self-interaction leads to the construction of the act, it is necessary to include the designations one makes to oneself of the situation in which one's act is taking place. Obviously, one takes note of features of the situation—the actions, remarks, and expectations of others whose acts intersect one's own; necessarily one also considers the facilities for action offered by one's surroundings. *But*, one may single out matters as objects of concern, define and judge them, and make them pivotal points for the organization and redirection of one's act.

Enough has been said, I trust, to make clear that the process of self-interaction occupies a central position in human social action. This brief account also indicates that self-interaction converts the act *from* something formed and propelled to completion by an initiating agent, *to* a line of activity built up by the actor. This view challenges the modes of analysis that, as previously mentioned, dominate current psychological and sociological practice. It is customary under such practice to select some type of initiating agent or agents, such as a drive, need, wish, feeling, attitude, idea, cultural pressure, status-demand, social role, social expectation, norm, value, or the like, to account for the act. The act is seen and treated as a product of one or a number of initiating agents. The initiating agent is regarded as providing the impulsion to the act, setting its goal, and sensitizing the organism to the selection of the means and facilities to use in achieving the completion of the act. Under Mead's conception of self-interaction, the initiating factor acquires a different status. Its role or influence in the act is set by how it is handled instead of by its intrinsic makeup. The person, in having a self, stands over against the initiating agent in place of being merely its instrument. To the extent that we indicate the initiating agent, or any of its aspects or manifestations, to ourselves, we are put in the position of acting back on it, checking it, judging it, revising it, and organizing ourselves with regard to it. To account for human acts in terms of psychological elements such as predisposition, initial stimuli, motives, feelings, or attitudes is to omit or ignore the play and place of the process of self-interaction. The same omission occurs in explaining acts in terms of such sociological categories as roles, status demands, social expectations, norms, and values. This picture is not changed, of course, by merely acknowledging the presence of self-interaction while holding that the self-interaction is only an instrument or handmaiden of an initiating and determining agent.

At this point, it is necessary to consider and correct several misconceptions

students are prone to form in judging Mead's view that the human act is constructed through a process of self-indication. A common charge is that such a view introduces a mysterious factor of "free will" into the act—a factor that negates the possibility of scientific inquiry and analysis. This charge is basically irrelevant to Mead's analysis of the act; to introduce it merely shunts discussion onto an unprofitable sidetrack. The presence of a process of self-indication in the human act is an empirical matter. And the operation and role of this process is an object of empirical determination. By observing themselves and garnering experiences of others, readers can judge whether in human acts the actors are engaged in noting, judging and handling details of their actions, deciding what to do, guiding their behavior, and having to cope with themselves in doing so. The question of whether such a self-process signifies the play of "free will"—whatever that may mean—is an entirely different concern and may be left to those who enjoy speculative play with that hoary and amorphous concept.

A second misconception is that the process of self-indication covers all parts of the act so that every minute step in its development comes under self-observation and guidance. This is a false picture. The self enters only at those points of the act that individuals note and designate to themselves. These points are scattered, even in the most self-conscious action. They are particularly minimal in routine action and may scarcely exist in highly excited behavior. Further, individuals do not treat alike all those aspects and portions of their act that they designate to themselves. Some aspects are given only fleeting recognition, sufficient to assure us that we are on the right track, whereas others may be objects of searching scrutiny and agonizing appraisal in our efforts to work out a suitable line of activity. It should be evident that the process of self-indication does not enter into, or embrace, all of human social action and that when it does intercede in the developing act, it does so only at varying points and with differing degrees of intensity.

A third misconception is that the process of self-indication implies that the actor exercises an Olympian-like understanding of, and control over, a developing act. Some students have misconstrued Mead's position to mean this. They believe that, in Mead's analysis, human beings are depicted as a highly rational actor, exercising a superior order of self-control over their action. There is no warrant for such a faulty interpretation. Mead's analysis of the act reflects what goes on in empirical experience and does not substitute an idealized picture of what such experience discloses. Unintelligent and irrational handling of one's acts and deficient control of them can readily occur inside the process of self-indication. Individuals may fail to note significant details of their acts or of the operating situations in which their acts are being constructed. They may define inadequately

or improperly what they do note, or they may be deficient in their ability to map out prospective lines of action. They may put up only halfhearted opposition to some of their impulses. Or lack of self-confidence or discouragement may lead them to undertake lines of conduct with great vacillation or much reserve. These common occurrences may result in a low level of intelligent conduct and an inadequate level of self-control. In no sense do they signify that the process of self-indication has been supplanted or eliminated in the formation of the act. Instead they point to how this process has functioned in the given instances of conduct. Very rational conduct and the exercise of a great deal of control over it represent only a high level of operation of the process of self-indication. Other and inferior levels of operation are not alien to the process of self-indication. Indeed, the important practical problem of raising the level of rational and moral conduct is fundamentally a matter of improving the operation of the process of self-indication rather than changing the initial agents of action.

The foregoing correction of three common misinterpretations of Mead's view of the role of the self in social action still leaves largely unanswered the question of the relation of the process of self-indication to the act in which it operates. Further consideration of this relation is in order at this point.

The fact that the self intercedes in the act calls attention to the important point that the act comes first and that the entry of the self occurs later. This is in accord with Mead's position that the human being is an organism before becoming a self and that, ontogenetically, the human being engages in action long before developing the mechanism of making indications to itself. Metaphorically, the self is grafted onto the organism. Before the self appears, action is solely a matter of organic disposition, environmental stimulation, and neural organization. The formation of the self, permitting human beings to make an object of their own action, introduces, as we have explained, a strikingly different dimension into social action. But this transformation does not alter the fact that initially the human act is an organic matter and that it retains an organic base even after being elevated to a new level through the process of self-indication. One should recall here the relation Mead traces out between the "I" and the "Me" and that the act is carried along by the "I." The "Me" intercedes when the individual notes and judges a phase of the action of the "I"; the individual then seeks to guide and control an action by prefiguring how to act; the prefigured representation sets the stage for the response of the "I," and the response of the "I" may vary from what is prefigured. As this analysis shows, the act in its organic form underlies the act in the directed and controlled form made possible by the process of self-indication. The act begins in the organism and proceeds as a series of organic responses.

The self intercedes in the act as a guiding and controlling mechanism. There are several points of great importance that follow from this relationship.

First, it is markedly inaccurate to put the self in the dubious position of the initiating agent of social action, thus treating the act as merely an outward expression of the self. There are schemes, as we have seen, that commit this error, especially those that identify the self with the "ego." The guidance and control of the human act is not exercised or given by the initiating factor or agent that launches the act; the act has to be handled, directed, and constructed after the point of its initiation. To place such direction and control of the act in the initiating agent is to misunderstand the nature of human action and is to put the self in the wrong place. The self, in the form of a process of self-indication, operates in the course of the act and cannot be reduced to, or collapsed into, an initial agent such as an ego. To endow the ego with a stock of elements such as "self-needs," "self-aspirations," "internalized norms and values," and the like throws light on certain aspects of the human being as an acting organism. Such an endowment, however, does not accommodate or explain the self-process that is the key to the construction and control of the act. The act has an onward thrust of its own, independent of the self; the role of the self is to enter in the act at different points to define it, direct it, and construct it. This intercession of the self may take place at any point in the span of the act but obviously never takes place at all points of the act, even in the case of an act that is under the most scrupulous self-scrutiny. We handle our acts only at scattered and usually key points, and at such points we handle them by prefiguring or sketching out a prospective step or line of action to which the "I" responds with the actual action.

This leads to a second important observation, namely, that the human act has unquestionably an unconscious portion or dimension—"unconscious" in the legitimate sense of not being in the purview of what the actor notes. Much of importance may lie along this unconscious dimension. Among matters that are lodged in the unconscious area of the act are the natural vigor of the act; spontaneous impulses that may have been aroused without the awareness of the actor; stereotyped mechanisms; fixed habits; and the "blind spots" of the actor, which may shut out from the actor's observation important parts or aspects of an act. No one who understands properly Mead's view of the act would deny or ignore this unconscious dimension of human social action. This unconscious dimension, in terms of its character, extent, and the matters it involves, varies from act to act of the individual and differs among types of acts. Accordingly, its nature and significance have to be ascertained in the case of the given acts or types of acts under consideration and cannot be presupposed on the basis of *a priori* theories of the so-called unconscious. The aspects of an act that the individual may not

note may be many indeed yet be of little or no importance, either to the individual or to the others into whose action the individual's act has to fit. Conversely, a few features of the act unnoticed by the actor may be of such a nature as to hinder or block others' effective adjustments to the act and thus have a great deal of significance. Further, in failing to note certain aspects of an action that induce adverse responses from others, the individual may indirectly become uneasy, disturbed, and distraught. Obviously, the role and the significance of many different facts of social action unperceived by the actor may vary enormously.

To view the "unconscious" as representing those aspects and details of one's action that one does not perceive—whatever be their form or degree of seriousness—brings the "unconscious" into somewhat of a fresh perspective. As we have seen in the earlier discussion of Mead's views on "objects," anything individuals do not indicate to themselves cannot be handled by them; they are in no position to organize and control their action toward it. To develop such organization and control requires, obviously, that they make an object of the given unconscious item and see it as it is defined by those into whose action their own action must fit. This may be a relatively simple matter, as in correcting someone's minor, unwitting fault, or a very complex matter that requires a major transformation of an individual's generalized other, as in the case of psychoses. In either instance, individuals must be put in the position of perceiving and identifying the previously unnoticed item in such a way that they can handle it in terms of the actions of others with which their own action must be aligned. This is equivalent to bringing the "unconscious" inside of the realm of self-designation and subjecting it to appropriate definition.

The distinction we are making between the act and the process of self-indication that may enter into it allows us to notice a third matter of much significance, namely, that there are basically two major points of attack for changing human conduct or social action. These are, one, to change the initiating agents of acts and, two, to change the ways by which acts are handled after the acts are initiated. The difference between these two approaches in changing social action has escaped, on the whole, recognition by scholars. The difference warrants serious consideration. Let us point out a few pertinent matters in the case of each of the two approaches.

As our earlier remarks suggest and as a survey of the literature shows, prevailing schemes are heavily or exclusively weighted on the side of the first of these two lines of attack. They presume that social action is to be changed by altering the initiating agents of acts. Thus, depending on the scheme, it is held that alterations in the field of stimulation, changes in motives, or changes of societal factors are the proper and effective way of recasting social action. What are the merits

and the limitations of this general contention? Obviously, if the initiating agents that give rise to given kinds of acts are not present, the corresponding acts will not be launched. Without hunger one would not be led to eat to satisfy hunger; without a fear-arousing stimulation, there would be no need to develop an act to deal with such stimulation; without an order or request to perform a task, action would not be set in motion from that source. The point is trite, indeed redundant, yet clearly important. To eliminate the initiating agents of given forms of social action would mean that such acts would not get under way; to alter the initiating agents in some radical way would mean that different kinds of acts are launched. This, of course, is the strong point of the various schemes that view human action as a product of initiating agents. Assuming that acts are launched by given physiological factors, motives, external stimuli, or societal pressures and incitants, the elimination or significant alteration of these launching agents would clearly result in changes in social action.

We need, nevertheless, to note several weighty limitations in the case of this general position. First there is the empirical difficulty of identifying accurately the initiating agents of social action. This difficulty should not be passed over lightly. The wide diversity in what is proposed in the social and psychological sciences as initiating agents suggests that the difficulty is formidable. One needs only to refer to the treatment of delinquency or crime, for example, to appreciate the depth of the difficulty. Inadequate or erroneous knowledge of the initiating factors would clearly nullify effort to induce desired changes in conduct.

A second and more serious limitation is the difficulty of changing the initiating agent, assuming that it has been properly identified. Admittedly, this difficulty might be negligible in the case of certain forms of social action. But the difficulty is seemingly very large in the case of the more serious forms of social action whose change is sought. In the light of what scholars are prone to advance as initiating agents—organic impulses, impelling motives, fixed patterns of stimulation, cultural imperatives, and forms of social structure—one is led to believe that, in the main, the initiating agents are deeply embedded, whether in physiological structure, psychological makeup, environmental context, cultural organization, or social structure. If the initiating agents of concern are deeply rooted in such formidable structures, the prospects of their direct elimination or radical alteration would seemingly be dim. Since the initiating agents are apt to be deeply set in the action context, the likelihood is that such agents would continue to be present and brought into play. To the extent that this is the case, a direct attack on initiating agents would be ineffective.

Mead's scheme points to a third and crucial limitation of the approach that focuses on the initiating agents. To alter initiating agents would lead, of course,

to changes in social action but would give no assurance as to the form of the new action that is to develop. As Mead's analysis indicates, the initiating agent does not determine the course of the human act. Instead, this course is forged through the process of self-indication. The new or altered initiating agent would merely set the occasion for the formation of a new act; however, the form and direction of the new act would depend on how the act was constructed by the individual. The new or altered initiating agent would necessarily have to be defined by the actor, the goal or objective of the act would have to be set by the actor, and the line of action would have to be carried out on the basis of what the actor takes into account. Thus, while a change in the initiating agent would admittedly set the stage for altered conduct, it would not give assurance that the new action that came into being would be the sort that one wished. The nature of the new action would depend on the process of self-indication.

Let us turn now to the alternative approach that is suggested by Mead's analysis of the human act. The recognition of the central position of the self-process in the construction of the individual act opens up a different and essentially new perspective on the problem of changing human conduct. While this perspective is implicit in much of what is done in everyday life, it is, by-and-large, ignored in scholarly or so-called scientific work because of preoccupation with the imagery of initiating agents. To view the human act as a product of an initiating agent is to strip the self from the human being as an actor and to exclude the role of the self-process in the formation of the human act. From the standpoint of Mead's scheme, doing so gives a false picture of the human being as an actor and, correspondingly, a distorted picture of the nature of the human act. In recognizing that the human being has a self, and in seeing that this self introduces a new process in the formation of conduct, Mead's scheme puts the study of social action into different focus. Attention turns to the question of how the human actor handles and constructs action. From this point of view, social action may be changed independently of a change in its initiating agents; that is to say, individuals may handle their acts differently and construct different lines of action even though the initiating agents remain the same. Under Mead's perspective, the central theme is that social action is changed by getting actors to redefine their acts and in this way to build them along new lines. The fundamental problem shifts to the question of how individuals may be led or equipped to handle their acts and to deal with the factors that enter into them. In restoring the self to the human actor and in introducing the self-process in the formation of the act, Mead opens up a new vista for the scholarly study of human action.

To summarize briefly at this point, we must distinguish between the act and the process of self-indication that enters into the act. Some human acts, in their

entirety, may take place without the process of self-indication, although such instances are rare after the individual has a self and clearly are not typical of human conduct. Predominantly and typically, self-indication enters the human act. In doing so it gives direction to the act and guides it in the course of its development, transforming the act into something constructed by the actor instead of being merely evoked or released from the actor. This intercession of self-indication may take place at any point in the act—from its point of initiation to a terminal point of consummation. The intercession is never at all points of the act but occurs at scattered key points where the individual finds it necessary to handle the act. The intercession is in the form of defining the act or a given portion of it, making an object of what is noted, and using the definition as a guide in the developing sequence of the act. Without such intercession human social action as we are familiar with it would not occur. This observation pinpoints the basic and crucial weakness in most schemes proposed for analyzing human social action. These schemes operate on the premise that an initiating agent—whether a stimulus, a motive, or a societal pressure—launches the act and carries it through to its completion. The schemes fail to recognize (a) that without the guidance provided by self-indication, the act could not take place and, accordingly, (b) that the fate of the act depends on what happens in this process of self-indication or definition. In treating and analyzing human social action, Mead's position represents a shift away from the view that such action is propelled by initiating agents to the view that such action is handled and constructed by the actor.

Let us turn now to Mead's analysis of the individual act. The treatment presented in his *Philosophy of the Act* is very disappointing for our purpose since it was undertaken chiefly to meet some of the cardinal problems of modern philosophy, such as the nature of scientific objects and their relation to immediate experience and the nature and place of "consciousness" in reference to the "real" world. While his discussion of such problems unraveled the central strands of the human act, relatively little consideration was given to the question of how human beings construct their acts in the social situation. We have to tease out of his scattered writings the answer to this question—a matter we will present further along. At this point we wish to consider Mead's formal analysis of the act, recognizing that this analysis was guided chiefly by philosophical interests. We shall pick out what is relevant for our purposes. In his formal analysis Mead identified four major stages of the act and labeled them as impulse, perception, manipulation, and consummation. Our treatment of these stages will be brief.

The stage of impulse is the initial stage of the act, appearing in the form of an aroused disposition or stirring of the organism that launches the organism into



action in an effort to satisfy or quiet the disposition. Mead's interest centered on the place and function of the impulse in the act; accordingly, he paid little attention to questions of the range of impulses, their types, origin, how they come into being, or the extent to which they are innate or acquired.<sup>1</sup> For Mead, the impulse was the point of departure; his concern was not with analyzing what lay behind the impulse. He was very much interested, however, in emphasizing that the impulse stood for a transition from *movement* to *action*. To regard the impulse as merely a link in a determinate chain, with antecedent conditions producing the impulse and the impulse in turn producing behavior, yields a picture of movement but not of action. Action begins in and with the organism. The impulse represents something qualitatively different from its antecedent conditions, in that it stands for an organism seeking an implicit goal or end instead of a physical body propelled along by a convergence of anterior forces. The impulse puts the organism in the position of having to deal with an environment, in contrast to merely moving along a vector set by antecedent lines of force. The impulse has its significance precisely in leading the organism to act toward an environment and handle it rather than to respond passively and mechanically, so to speak, to the pressure of environmental factors on it. Accordingly, the impulse functions to sensitize the organism vis-à-vis its environment, preparing the organism to select out of its surroundings the stimuli favorable to the furtherance or development of the act. The impulse stands for an active and acting organism seeking to utilize its environment rather than for a body responding mechanically to a set of initiating stimuli.

Mead carried over this theme to the important stage of perception, to which he devoted his major attention. Perception is action and not a passive registering of established objects. In order to perceive, the organism must be prepared to perceive; and to be prepared to perceive, the organism must be already engaged in using its sense organs. The percept, accordingly, is something that is "cut out" by the organism—the selecting of some details and values and the ignoring of others. The content and form of the perception correspond to what the organism is sensitized to pick out in terms of the ongoing activity. Perception arises, accordingly, in the service of the act and is a means by which the organism may move toward the implicit end of the act. At this point in his treatment of perception, Mead turns to a consideration of "objects" as they arise in human perception. His concern is predominantly with physical objects since his interest was to join issue with the widely held view that the "real" world existed in the form depicted by the findings of physicists and that such a real world operated on the human organism to induce and produce the objects as perceived by human beings. This interesting and bulky part of Mead's analysis is of little concern to us here

since it is directed primarily to epistemological considerations. There is, however, one aspect of his analysis that is very relevant to our treatment, namely, the way in which future activity is incorporated into the perception of an object. In our earlier discussion, we explained Mead's contention that the nature of an object arises from the way in which the individual is prepared to act toward it; in this sense, an object stands for a plan of action. In perceiving an object, one arouses and brings into incipient play the particular tendencies to act that confer on the object its distinctive nature. Thus, in seeing a hammer as a hammer, one incites in oneself the tendencies to grasp the handle, to lift the hammer, and to make a striking blow of it against another object; these tendencies to grasp, lift, and strike have not as yet come to overt expression, but they are necessarily reflected or expressed in the perception of the hammer. Similarly, the physical qualities of the hammer—the roundness of the handle, the smoothness of its surface, its hardness, its weightiness, and its given form of maneuverability—are incorporated in the perception of the hammer. Yet these qualities, Mead insists, are contact qualities—qualities that arise in an actual handling of the hammer as the individual feels the surface of the handle, encounters resistance to gripping of the handle, and experiences its weight in lifting it and wielding it as a striking implement. The presence of these qualities in the perception of the hammer prior to grasping it presupposes the activation of the gripping and wielding tendencies together with the contact experiences they would yield in actual execution. In this legitimate sense, the perception of the hammer is not a kind of photographic representation of an already constituted environmental datum but is instead a construct that stands for future action and the experiences such action would yield. The object, as Mead states, is a plan of action. In turn, the perception of the object is an activity composed of the activation of the tendencies to act that make up the plan of action.

This portion of Mead's discussion of perception can also serve to clarify his view of the nature of the "image" and its place in human conduct. The image, like the perception of an object, represents an aroused or poised mobilization to act; it is built out of tendencies to act and the experiences these tendencies would yield if actually executed. Indeed, for Mead the image arises when the given set of tendencies to act is aroused or incited but is checked or blocked from going over into immediate execution in the form of overt behavior. The image expresses this act of activated tendencies held in a state of arrest or suspension; the tendencies get expressed in the form of an image instead of in the outward and uninhibited form of overt action. The image, by virtue of being such a constellation of aroused but arrested tendencies to act, has, so to speak, a detached status; the image may be projected outward onto something and thus make the thing into

an object, or it may be kept apart and thus constitute an item in the life of imagination, as in the case of memory images or visual images seen with our eyes closed. By reason of this relative detachment, the image may affect in different ways the larger act into which it enters. Three of these ways are worthy of note. First, the image may facilitate the act that is in progress by providing guides to the satisfaction of the impulse; for example, the image of food in the refrigerator in an adjoining room may serve to orient the individual in that direction in a quest for food to satisfy hunger. Images function in conduct primarily in this way, by presenting possible lines of future activity that can be used to guide and direct present activity. Second, the image may be used to nurture and strengthen the impulse lying behind the act. The hungry individual who parades before the "mind's eye" images of delectable foods is invigorating the food-seeking impulse. The preoccupation with particular images, especially of the consumable objects set by the impulse, operates to intensify the impulse and strengthen its influence on the act. Third, in an opposite manner, the image may function to curb the act. By arousing images contrary to the act, the individual may dampen the impulse and inhibit the act in the process of its formation. The young man tempted toward an evil act may think of his mother, hungry individuals may have a repelling image of themselves as a fat person, and the incipient robber may hesitate over an image of being shot. What is important in this discussion of the role of the image in the act is that it stands for an aroused yet arrested set of tendencies to act, and that set of tendencies can be brought to bear in different ways on the act that is in the process of formation.

The third stage recognized by Mead in the development of the act is that of manipulation. Roughly speaking, this stage consists of the handling of the objects, set by perception, that are involved in the furtherance and completion of the act. As one would suspect, this stage of the act is concerned chiefly with contact experiences. Accordingly, it is used by Mead as the occasion for analyzing the nature of physical objects as depicted by physical science. But this is not our interest. Our concern with the stage of manipulation is along another line, namely, to point out that the use of objects becomes subservient to the act and, hence, that the objects are revised or take on meanings that fit their use. A chair in our society is primarily an object in which one seats oneself—this is its chief meaning, its main character as an object, and the usual way in which it is perceived. Yet in given acts it may be used in many other ways and thus become in the given acts quite different kinds of objects. Thus the chair may be used as a stepladder, as a barricade, as a weapon of attack or defense, as an imaginary castle in a charade, or as kindling wood when no other kind of badly needed fuel is available. In the manipulatory stage, objects are a function of the act, taking on

characters and undergoing changes in meaning that cannot be explained if one posits that the objects have a fixed character and an intrinsic stimulus makeup. The variability and transformability of objects in the manipulatory stage reaffirms the importance of the ongoing act in shaping the environment in place of being merely a response to alleged fixed characters in that environment.

The fourth and final stage of the act as conceived by Mead is that of consummation, exemplified by the consuming of food by the hungry person. It is the end of the act, the achievement of the goal, the satisfaction of the impulse. As such, it lies in the area of enjoyment and immediate experience, not instrumental or mediate experience. Mead holds that because of this character, consummation is the source of values, representing what is sought, desired, preferred, and valued. The value-character extends back over the entire act, existing as an anticipatory experience that imparts a sense of order and meaningfulness to the person in the act's earlier stages.

The four stages of the act should not be regarded as a serial order of parts, with each terminating as its place in the act is taken over by a succeeding stage. More correctly the stages should be viewed as playing upon each other, with impulse being defined by images of prospective goals, with impulse guiding perception but with perception acting back on impulse, with impulse facilitating the appearance of objects of manipulation, and with anticipatory consummation infusing earlier stages of the act. It is the interpenetration of these stages that confers on the act the character of a "whole," in contrast with a mere serial arrangement of separate parts, as results when action is viewed in physical terms.

Mead's treatment of the four stages of the individual act helps to bring out forcibly several matters of importance for our purpose. It affirms the point that the act is formed or built up instead of being a mere release of an already organized pattern of behavior. It stresses the searching and selecting character of the act. It emphasizes the role of imagery in controlling the act and guiding its progress by carving out lines of proximate activity. Above all, it calls attention to the fact that a major portion of the act is covert or in the form of an inner career. The interaction between impulse and image, which is so central in the formation of the act, is obviously a covert process and is not directly observable to outsiders. Put another way, the process of self-interaction, which is of primary importance in the development of the individual human act, is an inner process. This inner or covert portion of the act precedes the outer or overt part of the act. It is a preparation for the overt expression, a building up of the act in prospect prior to bringing it to outward execution. This covert formation is, of course, crucial in the entire act. To try to grasp the act on the basis merely of its overt expression is to overlook the process of its formation and can easily be the source of

pronounced misunderstanding. The individual act embraces far more than its overt phase.

Let us undertake a different line of analysis from that pursued by Mead in his treatment of the four stages of the act. Let us consider how the act is formed by the actor, operating inside the context of human group life. We start with the recognition that in having developed a self, human beings can make indications of their act and of its setting to themselves. Through this process of indication, we form and direct our action. If readers may still have doubts about this, they are invited to observe their own action as they engage in it; they will note that they become aware of their wants, needs, demands, and requirements; that they set objectives and goals toward which they act, prefigure possible lines of action to get what they want, have to consider the acts of others as those acts intersect their own, and note and judge the serviceability of objects and facilities in moving toward their objectives; and that they frequently have to spur themselves, force themselves, or restrain themselves in carrying out an act. They do these things by making indications of them to themselves and by guiding their action in the light of the indications. In this manner, human acts are built and directed by their actors. This is true whether the acts are stupid or rational, passionate or restrained, reprehensible or worthy, crude or refined, short-sighted or marked by great foresight, careless or punctilious. Whether humans do a good job in constructing many of their acts is open to question; that they construct them, regardless of their quality, is not open to question. Our problem is to consider the major factors involved in the *construction* of individual acts. We seek to get at these factors by considering two fundamental questions: (a) what are the kinds of things noted by human beings in constructing their acts? and (b) how are such things handled in the process of construction?

The matters humans have to note and take into account in the construction of their acts lie chiefly in four areas: (1) the act, itself, (2) the treatment of themselves as an object, (3) the situation in which their act is taking place, and (4) a more extended field of action of variable limits. First, as we have already explained, individuals have to take account of their own act and details of it in order to direct the act. At almost the very beginning of their act, the individual has to sketch out a prospective line of activity, either of the immediate step to be taken or of the larger act. This is done in response to whatever may occasion their act, for example, the recognition of a bodily need such as hunger; the recognition of being called on by another person to do something; the recognition during one's daily routine that it is time to perform a certain act, such as reporting for work; or a reminder that one has to meet an appointment. In the face of any such notation, individuals have to map out, in however rough or vague form, a pro-

spective act that represents what they are preparing themselves to do. Such a sketch of the prospective act involves (a) some realization of an initiating condition in the form of a need, wish, striving, demand, or reminder; (b) some identification of an end or objective for the act; and (c) some schematizing of a plan of execution. Without such a projective sketch in the early stage of the act, action would be either aimless or mere automatic release. The initial sketch gives, obviously, a focal point of direction to the individual's action. The initial sketch may be very fleeting and shadowy yet still sufficient to guide the formation of the act—as is predominantly the case with stable, routine acts. But the initial sketch may require elaboration, clarification, or recasting in order for one to act; one may have to clarify what one wants. One may have to work out a more definitive idea of the objective of the act and have to take pains in devising a plan for the execution of the act. Beyond this initial sketch of the act, further details or aspects of the act are likely to be noted in the course of its execution. It is necessary for one to note one's act at those points where its progression is interrupted, challenged, or blocked, as in recognizing that the act is not moving ahead as planned, or that it has encountered an obstacle that requires its reorientation, or that it is being subjected to adverse judgment by others. That we note such parts and features of our acts is a commonplace observation; and that the notations are essential to the furtherance of the acts should be evident. The question of how the notations are handled is a different matter, a matter that will be discussed soon.

Another set of indications we make to ourselves in constructing our acts is of ourselves as an object. These indications arise when we have occasion or need to consider ourselves as the director of our act, as when we note that we have no relish to undertake the act, that we are dragging our feet in its execution, that we are afraid, that our rights in performing the act are being questioned, or that the character of the act reflects back on us as an actor. We are familiar in our acts with the frequent need to spur ourselves on, to force ourselves to carry out an onerous task, to remind ourselves of what we should be doing, and to judge ourselves in the light of the act under way or in prospect. Such indications of oneself to oneself may enter into the act frequently and be crucial in determining its course.

A third array of things actors have to note in constructing their act lies in the "*immediate situation*" that confronts them. The act has to be geared to the setting in which it takes place and thus requires actors to pay heed to what is happening in the situation. The most important matters in the situation are the activities of others. Actors have to grasp the nature of the social or joint act represented by these activities and to note the indicatory gestures of others in order to fit their action to the actions of the others. We have to consider what others are doing

and what they are likely to do, particularly their expectations of us and their likely responses to lines of activity we might undertake. These are crucial matters in terms of which we must organize our act. In addition, we must note the physical objects that may be used or avoided in executing our act.

The fourth category of matters we may note in constructing our act is found in what I have referred to as the more extended *field of action*. This category consists of images of other acts, whether past or future, that do not lie in the immediate situation but whose recollection or imaginative devising may influence the act. They are likely to be memories of earlier experiences, images of other people and groups, and judgments of what may be the consequences of our act if it is carried to completion. Thus the recollection of an unfortunate experience in the past, the image of a condemnatory attitude by a venerated friend, or the conception of an unfortunate consequence that might result from our act may be very important notations we make in constructing our act. They are notations in that we hold such images of remote acts before our metaphorical mind's eye and treat them as objects to be considered in the forging of our conduct.

This prosaic recital of the four categories of items noted by the actor in forming acts does not tell us much, of course, about how the acts are constructed. It does call attention, however, to several matters of importance. For one thing, it gives an analytical picture of what constitutes the field of action from the standpoint of the actor. This "field" is in no sense limited to some kind of external setting or environment; it includes, paradoxically, the act and the actor, since both may appear at different points in the act as things the actor has to take into account in forging the act. Next, the recital suggests the wide variety of things that may have to be handled in organizing the act, depending on whether the act is simple or complex, brief or lengthy, charted or uncharted. It emphasizes that at different points in the act, we stand over against our act, ourselves, our situation, and a wider world and, thus, are put in the position of observing these matters, considering them, and dealing with them in shaping our act. It suggests, accordingly, that the human act is open and vulnerable at different points in its career, in the sense that one may judge one's act, check it, abandon it, or reorient it at such points. By the same token, these four categories of items offer points of attack for changing the act, in the sense of determining its career, setting its direction, providing points for its redirection, and yielding occasions when the act may be interrupted, recast, postponed, or abandoned. And, finally, these four categories of notation emphasize, again, that individuals have to construct their act or, to use Mead's term, "cut out" their act.

Let us turn now to the other major question—how does one handle the items one notes, the items one uses to construct an act? This exceedingly broad question

can be answered only in a correspondingly broad manner. We start with the trite yet crucial observation that one handles the items by defining them. This process of definition or interpretation is the key process. It has two obvious parts—identification and assessment. Let me consider each of them.

First, we must identify the items we note, giving them some kind of being or meaning. We do this by seeing them as objects in Mead's sense of the term. All of the things we indicate to ourselves, or take cognizance of, have this status of objects—our wants, the possible objectives of the act, the possible ways of reaching the objective, the acts of others, our feelings and images of ourselves, and other items falling in the four categories mentioned earlier. The identification of such items as given kinds of objects is no inconsequential matter since it provides the initial meanings on the basis of which we can proceed to organize our act. The acts being formed will obviously vary to the extent that we see the things noted as different kinds of objects. As wants, goals, schemes of execution, images of ourselves, and acts of others are seen as objects of one kind rather than another, the resulting acts will be different. I have two purposes in making this essentially redundant observation. The first is to call attention to the fact that the kinds of objects we make of what we perceive will depend on the repertoire of images (or stock of objects) we already possess. Second, this repertoire or stock of images (or objects) consists predominantly of images we share in common with our fellows. This is the case since, as our earlier discussion has explained, images or objects are formed through the defining activities of others with whom we interact. Those who participate in common interaction over time come to form a large stock of common images or, in other words, develop large numbers of objects with common meanings. The possession of a stock of common images explains in large measure why members of a given group construct similar kinds of acts; in using the same set of images, they are led to see their wants, goals, prospective lines of activity, and the acts of others in largely the same way.

The defining process in the construction of the act involves much more than the identification of items as given kinds of objects. It is necessary for us to evaluate the things we note or identify in order to determine their relevancy, fitness, possibilities, or implications. This evaluation is done by judging the given item on the basis of its relation to other parts of the context of action. [By "context" Blumer means the component elements of the overall "field of action" as he referred to it earlier. Ed.] Let us cite a few scattered illustrations: an individual identifies hunger but refrains from eating because it is not the appropriate hour; someone limits a purchase in light of the family budget; a businessperson enters into a shady plan for making a deal, calculating its legality can be upheld; a child observes that a chair can be used as a ladder to reach a cookie jar; a public meeting



participant who favors an unpopular proposition feels encouraged to speak out after finding that others are voicing similar views; a young person passes up a safe opportunity to steal because a significant other would disapprove; someone rejects an enticing proposition from an affable stranger because the stranger seems untrustworthy. As this miscellany of experiences indicates, human actors are called on to evaluate and judge the items they note in constructing their act. They have to make some sort of judgment of the factors' relevance and suitability to the given act in formation and to its context. Such evaluation is the most important part of the defining process in the formation of individual acts. It involves not only a "definition of the situation," to use W. I. Thomas's memorable statement, but also a definition of the act in progress, a definition of one's self when one is seen as an object in the act, and a definition of an extended field of action. The definition is accomplished by relating the object, as it is noted, to other facets of the act and of its context. In constructing their acts, individuals have to take account of many diverse things and have to make some kind of decision as to how to take them into account. This is done, of course, through a process of self-interaction in which actors are making indications to themselves and responding to the indications. The act is pieced together through this process.

In the process of defining what one notes, one is immeasurably aided by the schemes of definition already present in one's group. Just as there is a stock of common objects or images belonging to one's group, which one uses to identify what one notes, so there is a stock of common definitions to use in evaluating the objects that enter into the act. Thus, wants and needs, goals and objectives, schemes of execution, facilities to be used in carrying through the act, images of oneself, and acts of others are subject to common definition by people sharing a common universe of discourse or a common stock of meanings. This condition explains why so many individual acts are alike in the life of a given group. Such acts can be said to be charted in advance in fixed ways—given wants presuppose given goals; given goals presuppose given ways for their attainment; given situations are defined alike; the requests, commands, and expectations of others in the given situations are interpreted in uniform ways; and the self as an object is handled in the same way in the situations. Under such conditions, the piecing together of an act by the individual becomes largely a simple and regularized matter, and the dovetailing of the acts of different individuals takes place in a smooth fashion. This area of standardized social action stemming from common definitions is the forte of cultural, environmental, and most psychological explanations of human conduct. Since acts in this area are charted and regularized and since the process of self-indication follows established group definition and thus appears merely as their handmaiden, a scholar is seemingly on safe ground in

treating the acts as products of some postulated initial agent. In such charted acts, the fixed regularity and repetitive occurrence of the same action seem to make unnecessary any concern with a process of self-indication, even though that process is necessarily involved in the construction of the fixed and recurrent acts.

However, such charted and regularized acts constitute only a part of the social action of the individual and only a part of the life of the human group. We are familiar equally with the host of problematic acts in which action is not charted for the individual by preexisting definitions. These are acts with uncertain careers, either in prospect or in actuality. They include such common instances as wanting to do something but not knowing what one wants to do, wavering in the face of risky opportunities, having goals but not knowing how to reach them, having to struggle with oneself in the execution of acts, meeting new and perplexing situations, being entrusted with unclear tasks, and, above all, encountering others' opposition to one's acts. Such common instances plus many kindred kinds of experiences constitute the area of action that is marked by problems, frustrations, uncertainties, perplexities, worries, anxieties, unrealized ambitions and hopes, spoiled expectations, and threatening defeats. In this area, the defining process that takes place through self-indication cannot rely on the mere application of ready-made group definitions in order to assure the construction of acts and their completion. Instead, definitions have to be developed and worked out in the course of the act. A premium is placed on ingenuity, inventiveness, insight, cunning, adeptness in taking the role of others, and adaptability. And a demand is made on the readiness and ability of us as individuals to face and deal with ourselves. This is the area of crisis and drama, of struggle and abandoned acts, of innovation and reorganization, and of the formation of new objects. To use Mead's term, it is the area of social emergence in which new kinds of acts come into being.

We may conclude the discussion of the individual human act as conceived by Mead by noting once more that the presence of self-indication imparts a new character to action. There is a profound difference between action that does not involve this process and action that does. One must presume on the basis of empirical observation that nonhuman animals engage in acts, they undoubtedly have needs and impulses, they are oriented toward remote objects that may satisfy such needs, and they engage in intermediate activity in seeking to reach such objects. Yet the absence of a self keeps their action on a very different plane—they respond to stimuli instead of identifying and defining objects. There is a vast difference, for instance, between being hungry and recognizing that one is hungry, between being oriented toward some kind of goal and being aware what the goal is, and between moving toward a goal and directing oneself toward a goal. The ability to make indications to oneself brings the act and its field into the purview

of the actor as something out of which to construct a line of action. The act is constructed through a defining process in which objects are formed, assessed, and taken into account, all of which require the making of indications to oneself. Any scheme that purports to analyze human action has to accommodate and handle this defining process. This defining process cannot be accommodated effectively by treating it as a preordered and obedient servant of postulated initiating agents of action. The defining process is obviously not handled by ignoring it or making it a mere handmaiden of something else. Under Mead's scheme this process is central in the formation of human conduct and must be recognized as operating in its own right. It constitutes the means by which human actors, standing over against their field of action, have to construct a line of conduct.

We should note, also, in these concluding remarks, that this process of self-indication constitutes what Mead means by "mind" and by "consciousness," in the legitimate sense of being conscious of something. Mind exists in the form of the social or communicative activity one carries on with oneself. This view of "mind" cuts through the traditional mind-body dichotomy, which places the mind in a separate realm of its own in the form of a stuff of consciousness. Mead lodges the mind in the realm of action as a particular form of activity. The implications of this view for the treatment of the cardinal problems of philosophy are profound. Even though these philosophical implications were of major concern to Mead, they are of minor import in our sociological and psychological consideration of human action. Of vastly greater importance to us is the idea that the mental activity of human beings consists of an interpretative process in which the actor identifies objects, sizes up situations, and organizes conduct. This internalized social process, which necessarily draws heavily on the images and definitions current in the life of the actor's groups, but which places the actor logically over against those groups, opens up a new vista for the fruitful study of human conduct.

Mead insists that the individual human act takes place in the context of the social act, of which it is indeed a part. Logically, the analysis of the social act—the joint action of persons—should precede a treatment of the individual act. We have chosen for convenience in exposition to invert this order of consideration. We next wish to discuss the nature of the social act.

## Notes

1. Mead is definitely open to the charge of ambiguity, if not inconsistency, on this last question; at points he explicitly defines an impulse as congenital, yet his usage shows that he did not adhere to this definition. However, as our discussion will show, this ambiguity is of little importance since Mead's concern was with the role of the impulse and not its source.



WE MOVE NOW from the treatment of the individual act to a consideration of the “social act.” Logically, the reverse approach should have been used in order to be in line with Mead’s point of view. For him, as explained earlier, group life precedes individual conduct. Individual conduct arises and takes its form inside of human association. For Mead, human group life is not an addition or assemblage of separate individual acts, each with its own independent lines of formation. It consists, instead, of joint activity, inside of which the individual act is being formed as it is directed to fit into an ongoing patterning of the acts of others.<sup>1</sup> Group life is a social process—the collective activity of people—and the individual act exists as an integral part of that process. The meaning of this characterization needs to be made clear—a task that can be best approached by pointing out first of all what it does not mean.

Group life exists in what people do. It is not a preestablished organization, conceived in terms of the completed acts that it is believed or hoped the people will carry out. However much people may conform in their acts to such a preestablished scheme, the scheme is not their action. Nor is group life a kind of product of the acts of the individual participants, such as the articulated arrangement into which one finds the completed acts of the individuals to have fallen. Group life consists of the actual *acting* of people—not of a conceived organization that antedates that acting, nor of an articulated product of that acting.

Group life, as we shall see, has an organized character, but that character exists *in it*, not before it or after it. Recognizing that group life exists in what people do, the place of the individual act must be seen in terms of how it fits into what other people are doing. Individuals have to meet and deal with the actions of other people. This is the point of reference for viewing their act instead of viewing it in relation to a postulated anterior group organization or similarly conceived pattern of the completed acts of people. The world that confronts the individual and with which the individual has to deal is constituted by the actions of other people (including the individual as an other). This, rather than an organization postulated by the scholar, is the context of the individual’s action. Group

life consists of the alignment of individual lines of action. The individual participant is confronted with the need of fitting an act into the acts of others and of getting them to fit their acts into the individual's act.<sup>2</sup>

This observation provides a basis for explaining the nature of the social act.<sup>3</sup> While Mead repeatedly stressed the vital role of the social act, his specific discussion of it was scanty and unsystematic. One has to piece together an account of it from what is implied in his discussion, instead of from a direct treatment of it by him. For him, the social act consisted of joint activity directed, explicitly or implicitly, toward an objective or end. Such joint activity could be limited to two individuals, or it could extend to vast and highly differentiated numbers of people on an international scale. The social act is seen most readily in the form of purposeful cooperative behavior wherein participants are engaging in the accomplishment of a common task—so let us consider this form first. Instances of such cooperative behavior will readily occur to anyone: two people trying to move a heavy log, a baseball team playing a game, a church congregation engaging in worship, a labor union carrying out a strike, an army fighting a battle, and a nation waging a war. All such instances show a coordination of lines of action in an effort to achieve a given goal. Each involves different positions of the participants in the joint task, a division of labor or function, and the carrying out of different levels of activity that fit into a larger form of collective action. This larger form of collective action constitutes a social act. We should note several features of its relation to the individual act. First, the act of the individual participant, taken by itself, does not show the nature of the social act; one has to link the individual act to the acts of others in order to catch the social act and also in order to understand the nature of the individual act. This is a genuine case in which the social act exists as a whole and can only be seen by the observation or indication of the whole, and further, the individual act loses its significance unless it is seen as part of the whole. Also, the individual act is being formed inside the social act as the latter is being formed. This relationship is not one wherein the social act is already formed and then is expressed in the individual act or imprints itself on the individual act.

The individual act is formed within, and as part of, the social act by virtue of the fact that the individual is engaged in interacting with others as all are engaged in building up the social act.<sup>4</sup> This leads to a final observation. Just because the individual act is, itself, forged in the interaction that the individual has with others, as the individual responds to their indications and definitions and gets them to respond to his indications, the individual stands over against the social act being formed. Consequently, the fitting of the individual's own act into the social

act is not automatic—the individual may hesitate, procrastinate, act with reservation, and indeed fail to fit into the social act.

Social acts in the form of collective undertakings, calling for conscious cooperative behavior, make up a large part of human group life. Mead identifies another type of social act of major significance. This takes the form of an unwitting or essentially unplanned coordination of individual and group acts around an implicit goal or end. A good illustration is the complex division of labor that may grow up around the production of a given commodity for the market. Department stores in cities may sell a piece of costume jewelry in the form of a miniature leather mouse with an attached brass clip. The leather may come from cattle in one part of Brazil, be tanned in Sao Paulo, then sent to a factory in Rio de Janeiro and shaped into mouse forms that are shipped to Los Angeles, assembled there with brass clips made in Tokyo, distributed through jobbing houses in Chicago, New York, and other cities, further distributed to widely scattered retail outlets, and finally bought by adolescent girls. Many different people living in diverse places and engaged in different economic activity are involved in manufacturing and selling this rather inconsequential object. The people performing these different functions in the manufacture and marketing of this item have essentially no knowledge of one another and of one another's contribution to the product. Yet their respective acts fit together to constitute an organized line of activity in group life.<sup>5</sup> Obviously, there is a manifold of such instances in our group life. Such extended lines of coordinated activity, essentially unperceived by the participants, are by no means confined to the area of an economic division of labor. They may come into existence in all major realms of human group life—political, religious, educational, legal, recreational, and so forth. In such realms, an array of diverse acts may be joined into a larger concatenated whole, with few participants having knowledge of the larger pattern. In the field of law enforcement, for example, we see an elaborate, interlinked organization of action involving policemen, public officials, prosecuting attorneys, defense attorneys, judges, bailiffs, bondsmen, probation officers, politicians, "fences," professional fixers, and others. Such larger complex actions, bespeaking largely unrecognized coordination and unwitting cooperation, are regarded by Mead as a very important form of social act. They represent one important kind of collective act that cannot be understood in terms of its individual components.

Mead attaches great significance to this type of social act. Such social acts constitute a large part of the functioning organization in a society, as distinguished from what might be referred to as a formally delineated organization. Much of this functioning organization may be hidden, since there is wide latitude in the way in which separate parts in the chain may become articulated to each

other. For example, we on the outside have little (and usually only stereotyped) knowledge of what takes place between policemen and violators, policemen and their superiors, defense attorneys and prosecuting attorneys, prosecuting attorneys and judges, judges and bondsmen, and bailiffs and other officials; further, participants in the complex social act, such as a judge, may have only limited knowledge of what takes place in other parts of the social act in which they are not directly involved. To this observation we should add the recognition that inside the social process—the complex life of the group—new social acts may be emerging and old ones may be undergoing transformation, with much of the emergence and transformation escaping notice. Mead believed that one of the major tasks of social science—perhaps its most important task—was to identify and “dig out” the character of the more important social acts in operation or formation in the broad expanse of institutional life. By catching these social acts in their whole character and by ascertaining what takes place at the points of coordination of their component acts, one would be lifting the veil from large areas of societal action. Such knowledge, admittedly descriptive in character, would reveal the social process in operation and in formation; it would enable one to make objects out of the functioning organization in group life and thus lay the bases for intelligent control over this organization. Such knowledge would also permit the formation of “generalized others” more in harmony with the social world inside which individuals live and to which they have to adjust themselves.

This is an opportune point to elaborate briefly the meaning of “social organization” when viewed in terms of Mead’s concept of the social act. The idea of social organization and the kindred idea of social structure are, of course, deeply implanted in contemporary sociological thought and exercise pervasive influence on theoretical analysis and research enterprise in sociology. Organization and structure are depicted almost invariably as *established* or *completed* forms—such as a set of cultural patterns, a scheme of norms and values, a constellation of status positions, a structure of roles, an arrangement of social strata, or a hierarchy of superordinates and subordinates. Even though the given structure chosen for analysis may be recognized to be an abstraction out of the flow of group activity, it is given a fixed form. In turn, the given type of group activity under consideration is treated as an expression of the structure. In this manner, process is lost; group activity becomes merely a product of structure. Such a view of social structure or organization is basically different from that set by Mead’s idea of the social act. Organization is in the act rather than in something that precedes and produces the act. Organization is functioning organization and is understood by ascertaining how the component parts (individual acts) actually fit together. Since the component individual acts are constructs, built up by the individual participants

as they take each other into account in their interaction, their joining together provides opportunity for novel arrangements that can be very easily lost from view when one treats structure as a fixed articulation determining behavior. Especially is this the case if the participants at the different parts of the social act have appreciable areas of discretion in the construction of their individual acts. Such discretion is always present to a degree—sometimes to a very minor degree and sometimes to a major degree. The import of this analysis is that social organization or structure is resident in the functioning of the social act. Its character is not exhibited by the announced or presumed objectives of the given organizational arrangement or by sets of formal rules, which are supposed to guide the articulation of the individual component acts. Instead, organization has to be dug out by ascertaining what is taking place at the points where individual component acts are being linked together. Some appreciation of this need has emerged in sociological thought in the recognition that an “informal social structure” may grow alongside or inside a “formal social structure.” This is a wholesome step in the direction of seeing organization as “functioning” organization. But the idea that social organization lies in the social act means something more than tacking an informal social structure onto a formal social structure. Organization must be seen as arising in the process of fitting components, individual acts, to each other—a process in which the participating individuals are forging their individual adjustive acts in terms of the definitions and expectations imposed on them, their own interests, the constraints the situation places on them, and the opportunities afforded for distinctive lines of individual action. Organization is the imposition of fixed forms only in degree (even though this imposition may approach totality in given situations); organization is primarily formation in the give-and-take of interaction. This view of structure as being within the formation and functioning of the social act places in proper context such matters as commitment, identification, morale, attachment to principles, alienation, subversion, and exploitation by putting them inside an organizational process. It should be evident that Mead’s view of the social act puts the idea of social organization or structure in a different perspective.

## Notes

I. Such ongoing joint activity constitutes the subject matter for the study of the group, serving as the point of departure for analysis, and is the empirical world to which one must return in testing proposed interpretation. It follows that schemes of analysis—such as are represented by the concepts of culture, social structure, institutions, values, norms, and social roles—must respect and be faithful to the character of the ongoing activity that makes the social group and its life what they are. The units of the group are not individuals but acting



individuals; the life of the group consists of the moving alignment of these individual actions; the relation between the individuals is a relation between their respective lines of action. The social group does not reside in any posited scheme, such as organizational structure, cultures, institutions, values, resources, or social roles; at best these are abstractions whose validity depends on how faithfully they respect the nature of the process of ongoing joint activity in the group.

2. **Social Act:** The social act as conceived by Mead is a joint act, involving the participation of two or more persons. It arises automatically whenever persons enter into association with each other and are thus confronted with the need of taking account of the acts of each another in forming their respective acts. The social act thus is made identical with the fitting together of the acts of the participants. Since group life consists of the aligning of acts of participants, the social act becomes for Mead the unit of society. The analysis of the social act, accordingly, provides the scheme or model for the analysis of human society. Human beings interact by interpreting each other's acts and forming their own acts on the basis of such interpretation. The most significant feature of the social act is its joint character—a character that gives it a transcending unity or interlinked makeup of its own. This feature is so important that it warrants further exposition. One can point out that on a simple level a mere falling together of the acts of the participants forms an interlinked arrangement that would not exist if the separate acts of the participants were not joined together. The wooing or courtship practice of a pair of birds would not occur if the respective acts of the separate birds were to happen in isolation from each other. It is the intertwining of these acts, the fitting of each to the other in their process of formation, that constitutes a courtship pattern. The interlinking of the separate acts yields a joint or collective makeup that can be identified, labeled, and described as such. Thus, in the case of nonhumans, we can recognize such joint acts as wooing, swarming, attacking, protecting, nursing, grooming, feeding, and similar types in which separate acts of insects or animals fit together to form a larger distinctive collective arrangement.

3. Mead singled out as the distinctive characteristic of a society the fitting together of the lines of activity of its participants. Such an aligning of acts constitutes both the process and the content of human group life. In all of the multitudinous instances of human association, one notes that the participants have to fit or adjust their ongoing acts to one another. Whether they be in a conversation, business transaction, game, fight, ceremony, or whatnot, the participants have to take account of the acts of one another and guide their own acts thereby. This fitting together of acts serves to relate them to each other, to make them dependent on each other, and thus to bring them together in the form of joint or combined action.

As the instances signify, a social act has a form, an arrangement, an interknit relationship, that is something other than an addition of the separate acts of the participants. A conversation is more than two or more separate lines of remarks, and a business transaction is more than the disparate acts of the parties. The separate acts are related to, and connected with, each other to form a larger collective arrangement in which the separate acts of the participants are incorporated. Indeed, the separate acts get their significance only in terms of the larger collective scheme in which they fit as constructed parts. In a very legitimate sense, a social act has a character of its own that transcends and gives meaning to the participant acts that are implicated in it. The modes of reference in our everyday language clearly recognize this. Thus we speak of a wedding, a family quarrel, a war, the construction of a bridge, a political election,

a robbery, a lecture, or a trading transaction. Each of these is a joint affair, a combination of diverse acts of participants, and forms a collective act having a distinctive and identifiable character.

According to Mead, the social act has a transactional aspect, signifying, as the label indicates, that the social act has a unitary character in its own right. This unitary character is not to be found in any or all of the component individual acts when viewed separately; it exists in the larger pattern seen as they fit together. I assume that there is no difficulty in seeing this larger unitary character in the case of the types of social acts that have been noted. A baseball team playing a game or a surveying party mapping the prospective route of a railroad can be legitimately recognized as engaging in a cooperative or collective undertaking that can be described, judged, and analyzed in its own right. Similarly, a complex functioning arrangement—such as a banking system—involving the coordination of many diversified acts among participants who are unwittingly in cooperation can, and indeed must, be treated as a societal operation with its own character. However, the recognition of a unitary character in these two types of social acts still does not bring out vividly the transactional feature that Mead wishes to emphasize in the case of the social act. We can catch and reveal this feature better by turning to the simple instance of social interaction. The social act may be seen as a step-by-step progression in which each of the participating organisms uses the presented portion of the ongoing act of another as a guide to the formation of its own developing act. The interaction is not between completed acts, in the sense that a participating organism goes through a series of movements that on completion serves as the stimulus for a responding series of movements on the part of another organism, with the latter series constituting a stimulus to the first organism. Instead, each organism follows the movements of the other organism, using portions of these movements as the pivots around which its own “development act” is adjusted coterminously to the development act of the other. These portions of the developing action constitute what Mead terms “gestures.” Interaction is between gestures and not between acts; or put otherwise, it is between acting organisms in the course of their respective action rather than at a series of terminal points in their action. Accordingly, the key to Mead’s analysis of social interaction is his concept of “gesture.”

4. For Mead, the life of a human society is a process—a social process. It is in passage. This passage is represented by the formation of the act in the individual and accordingly in the social act involving joint individual acts. This passage or development in the case of the social acts constituting the social process or the life of the group signifies immediately a career, a history, a formation, or a growth. Group life is activity, but it is activity that is being formed and constructed.

What are some of the implications of this? For one thing, the passage or development always presupposes a stable background. The novel is set against such a background. The stable background or setting would seem to be constituted by common meanings, by what Mead means by universals. These represent common social attitudes, or what is common to diverse perspectives. They mean that objects are alike to the people who act toward them or use them, and similarly that the situations that confront them are alike. They are constituted by what we speak of as customs, shared roles, and so forth. The social act constitutes and represents the situation wherein the individual actor is embraced and is consequently subject to an inexorable control. The individual act is framed by the social act and takes place within

its context. Whereas one builds up one's act (and accordingly exercises control over it), one does not build up the *social* act and may have essentially no control over it at all. One may, indeed, be unaware of the social act in which one is enmeshed. In not perceiving it or indicating it to oneself, one can, even in the first instance, do nothing about it. Further, if one is aware of the social act, one may not be able to do anything about it—since to do so requires controlling the acts of others, which one may not be able to do. Still further, people collectively who are involved in a social act may all be carried along by it and do nothing about it—either because they are not aware of it, or if aware of it, because they have no wish or intent to do anything about it or means of acting collectively to change it.

5. Under Mead's scheme, the basic fact of social relationship consists of the kind of objects that individuals and groups are to one another. As previously explained, an object represents a relation to the person to whom it exists as an object, in that it corresponds to a set of tendencies to act on the part of such a person. Viewing social relations in terms of the kind of objects that people, groups, categories of people, and individuals are to each other brings social relationship inside the field of action. This is a most fruitful and down-to-earth way of viewing social relations.

Now we should recognize that alongside this important form of relationship may be an indirect and initially hidden relationship by virtue of implication in complex social acts. That is to say that in such acts, which spread out over time and space, individuals and groups may be involved without knowing of one another and consequently without being social objects to each other; yet they may be vitally affected by each other's acts. A significant form of relationship exists here that calls attention at once to two matters of importance. First, the hidden or indirect relationship has to be identified by study and cannot be posited or presumed in advance in the social act or class of social acts in which the relation is supposed to exist. Second, in becoming aware of the asserted relations, the participants make social objects of one another. Such social objects need not correspond at all accurately to the hidden relations; they introduce another kind of relationship, which may be of utmost importance, especially in terms of prospective action.

## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION TO THE APPENDIXES: CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN HERBERT BLUMER AND DAVID L. MILLER AND SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS



**T**HROUGHOUT HIS ACADEMIC LIFE, Herbert Blumer carried on a lively correspondence with scholars from all over the world on a wide variety of topics pertaining to human affairs. Despite weakening eyesight and increasing numbness in his hands in his later years, he continued answering letters until only a short time before he died in 1987.

Like many academics, Herb accumulated a great deal of material. Unfortunately for historians of social thought, just prior to moving to Berkeley, in 1952, he threw out nearly all of the memoranda, letters, and papers he had collected while at Chicago, including correspondence with Robert E. Park, Ernest W. Burgess, Louis Wirth, and Mead. Still, among the materials that Herb kept were some of his correspondence with Professor David L. Miller.<sup>1</sup> In addition to some more substantial correspondence between Miller and Blumer, six items of a more isolated nature are included in this appendix.

### **Herbert Blumer and David L. Miller: On George Herbert Mead's Contributions to Understanding Human Conduct**

The letters in this appendix were written between May 1979 and September 1984. While evidencing mutual scholarly respect, their correspondence breaks new ground, explores emerging lines of thought developed in published literature, and considers established theoretical and methodological concerns in sociology and social psychology. I have attempted to maintain the continuity of their

commentary, but readers are advised that these materials are excerpts from their more extended correspondence.

The letters that follow are divided into five parts. The subjects that Blumer and Miller discuss are developed in somewhat different ways from what one might associate with a paper or a more immediately situated dialogue because they are couched within a discourse taking place over a number of years. Both Herb and David are extensively familiar, as well as deeply intrigued, with the relevance of Mead's work for the study of social order and people's conduct. They are also aware of various ambiguities in Mead's work. Thus their exchanges afford them opportunities to consider one another's views as well as to formulate their thoughts on such matters. Readers may observe that these materials develop slowly at times and are fragmented on occasion, without necessarily resolving the issues raised. Still, for those more interested in Mead's work and in the study of human interaction more generally, Blumer and Miller deal with some topics in detail and offer some intriguing points for subsequent reflection.

The first set of exchanges, "Revisiting the Generalized Other," takes place between March 13, 1979, and July 1, 1980, and provides an extended consideration of George Herbert Mead's "generalized other." Although Blumer valued Mead's concept of the generalized other, he had also long been perplexed by the direction and comprehensiveness of the term as Mead used it. Because Herb thought it was not adequately defined, he referred infrequently to the generalized other in his own work. And, as suggested in the Blumer-Miller correspondence, he has yet more extensive reservations about Mead's notions of the "I" and the "Me." He thinks the "I/Me" relation obscures analysis of human activity. Such reservations notwithstanding, Herb particularly relishes the opportunity to consider the generalized other with another scholar intimately familiar with Mead's work.

With an eye toward resolving ambiguities and confusions, Blumer and Miller address a variety of controversial aspects of the generalized other. Among the issues they consider are a person's sense of self, the relationship of the "I" and the "Me," the ways in which the generalized other may be used in formulating acts, the relevance of the generalized other for people's selves and knowing, role-taking, diversity and continuity in group life, components of the generalized other, the generalized other and (the problematic concept) personality, the generalized other and adjustment processes, and the generalized other and its relevance for the "social" aspects of human life.

In contrast to those who would define the generalized other as another approximation of a reference group or limit it to a stage in the development of the self, Blumer and Miller consider it as more an enduring and broadly relevant

ongoing process. Attending to what Mead (1934, 1938) called "sociality," a situation in which something or part of it exists simultaneously in two perspectives (for example, the "old" and the "new"), Miller suggests that continuity of the generalized other is achieved as the past is selectively brought into the present and through the course of the act reaches into the future. Insofar as the generalized other is tied to people's activities (as in acts and situations), elements of its "old" form are drawn into the present and projected into the future. As Mead (1932, 1934, and 1938) argued, the past and future are joined through covert and overt action in the present, and the present is a dynamic nexus of the interaction of the past and future formed by the actor in regard to an emerging situation. An actor's generalized other(s) achieve continuity in a present as action is constructed.

Given this view, Herb asks what forms the generalized other may assume and how it is brought to bear on social action. In posing these questions, he describes a half dozen possible role relations from which various generalized others might be constructed and, in the process, provides a useful guide for scholarly inquiry into relationships among situational definition, developing individual and collective acts, and role-taking.

In this first set of correspondence, Blumer also asks about the relation between the generalized other and "large combinations of separate acts" and whether different notions of generalized others in situations are involved when one actor's experience is different from another's.

The second part, titled "On Chicago Interactionism," is a very brief discussion (March 6, 1981–April 21, 1981) of "The Lewis and Smith Book" and serves as an introduction to later correspondence involving this book and related confusions generated by authors who adopt standpoints similar to Lewis and Smith's. Miller has been asked to review the book and comments briefly on his analysis to Blumer.

Miller takes issue with Lewis and Smith's contention that Mead viewed the meaning of a significant gesture as the result of a physiologically based common response. For Mead (and Blumer), the act of human interpretation intervenes between "mere indication" and response. For a behavior to become a "significant gesture," the actor must indicate it to himself, make an object out of it, and attach meaning to it. Only then can action in regard to that object occur. By ignoring the distinction between indication and interpretation, Lewis and Smith misrepresent Mead (and Blumer) in a most fundamental way. Miller (Letter to Blumer, March 28, 1983) emphasizes the significance of Blumer's view, observing that if people did not decide what to do based upon interpretation of the meanings of

a common understanding, "There would be no human freedom, no choice, no creativity, no individualism, no self motivation and no morality."

Blumer's view of Mead's perspective invites analyses of the role of interaction in achieving common understanding and of how understanding is achieved, recognized, and tested. Following Mead, Blumer notes that without shared meaning, communication and all that follows from it (including the social world) cannot exist.

The third topic, "On Self-Interaction," is covered in a letter that Blumer (August 11, 1982) wrote to Miller wherein Herb considers the theoretical and empirical implications of the process of self-indication for supporting a Meadian image of human conduct. As will become apparent later, this letter represents a bridge of sorts to Blumer and Miller's discussions about the shortcomings of some people's perceptions of Meadian social thought.

The fourth topic, "On Misconstruing the Nature of the Social Act" (November 4, 1982–April 8, 1983), begins with Blumer's consideration of a common misinterpretation of Mead revolving around the significant gesture and its role in formation of the act. Here Blumer references a statement entitled "Functional Identity of Response" (circa 1925) that Miller (1982) included in the appendix of *The Individual and the Social Self: Unpublished Work of George Herbert Mead*.

As this part of their correspondence unfolds, we find Blumer and Miller focusing directly on components of the act, noting that a number of analysts have created major confusions for themselves and others by neglecting the interpretive and deliberative processes that inhere in Mead's depictions of social behavior. Miller, who recently had criticized Lewis and Smith for misconstruing this central point of Meadian thought at a philosophy meeting in which he and Lewis were coparticipants, recounts the situation to Blumer.

The fifth and last part of the Blumer–Miller correspondence, "On Emergence" (May 10, 1984–September 18, 1984), focuses on the matter of process or the flow of human conduct. Observing that scholars usually consider Mead's notion of "emergence" in terms of the appearance of novel entities, Blumer wonders whether the process might also refer to things that endure or persist in "established" form.<sup>2</sup>

## Supplementary Materials

Six other items that shed light on Blumer's interpretation of elements related to Mead's perspective are presented in this last section. The first two pieces, the second of which is a letter (Blumer, April 26, 1971) to Professor Peter List, pertain to Herb's views on the nature of meaning. In item three, Blumer considers

the applicability of the term "social behaviorism" as a description of Mead's views. The fourth enclosure is a letter (Blumer, October 30, 1981) Herb had written to Peter Mills regarding the significance of "explicit" meaning in constructing "objects" and in shaping human conduct. The fifth item is a note Blumer wrote on planning and habit as they relate to action. The last statement, "Reflections on the Thoughts of Sir Muhammad Iqbal," presents Blumer's interpretation of relations among self, self-fulfillment, and moral standards as revealed in two of Iqbal's most well-known poems.

## Notes

1. Professor David L. Miller (May 6, 1903–January 8, 1986) was a world-renowned scholar specializing in the philosophy of G. H. Mead. He received a B.A. degree from the College of Emporia in Kansas in 1927, and went on to attend the University of Chicago. According to the "Report of the Memorial Resolution Committee for David Miller" (chaired by Douglas Browning, 1986, University of Texas, Austin), Miller's experience in Mead's "Social Psychology" course in 1928 prompted him to seek a Ph.D. in philosophy. Mead, according to the committee, supervised Miller's dissertation work on "emergent evolution" until his death in 1931, when Charles W. Morris stepped in and took over that role. Miller received his Ph.D. in 1932 and gained a teaching position at the University of Texas in 1934. He taught there throughout his distinguished career. Miller collaborated with John M. Brewster and Albert M. Dunham in preparation of Mead's *Philosophy of the Act* (1938). Among Miller's many scholarly contributions are a major work (1973) interpreting Mead's pragmatism and a volume exploring his own life-long interest in freedom and "individual achievement" in an "open society" (Browning 1986). Aside from their obvious mutual interest in Mead, Blumer and Miller shared a love of football. Blumer was an All-American in college, and Miller, according to the committee, was an All-Conference guard his senior year in college. From reading the committee's statement about Miller, one can see that they also experienced tough financial times growing up, worked their way through school, and knew first-hand what "city life" involved. For example, Blumer knew some of Chicago's notorious underworld figures, and Miller was (as the committee notes), for a time, the bodyguard for Sally Rand, a popular fan dancer in the 1930s. Blumer and Miller developed a lengthy friendship even though they never met face to face.

2. For an extended discussion of the nature of emergence, see: Chang (1970), McHugh (1968), Meltzer and Manis (1992, 1995), and Morrione (1988). Blumer viewed emergence as an intrinsic feature of all realms of reality. He saw persistence and change as ubiquitous, coexistent, ongoing emergent processes (Morrione 1998).



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# Appendix I

## HERBERT BLUMER AND DAVID L. MILLER: ON GEORGE HERBERT MEAD'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO UNDERSTANDING HUMAN CONDUCT



### Part 1: Revisiting the Generalized Other

DAVID L. MILLER (March 13, 1979):

Thank you very much for your essay on *Mead* [*a draft of Blumer 1981; Ed.*]. . . . I have read it, and I believe I agree with it fully. Your statement about selves, which implies that individuals can indicate things (in their absence as well as in their presence) to themselves[,] is crucial. The further implications of this fact are, as you say, mostly neglected by social scientists. Your statement that Mead brings conflict within the social process and deals with it effectively is correct. There are many suggestions in your essay that can be developed more fully, and I am of the opinion that Mead is being studied more and more. . . .

I think your approach to Mead is more in line with contemporary problems in sociology than is mine, which is slanted more toward problems in epistemology and freedom and creativity of the individual. I hope I can say that the work is supplementary to yours. . . .

I believe Mead would agree that consciousness, when used in the cognitive sense, means being aware of, and sensitive to, something not now present, not here-now, and that this can be done only by use of symbols whose meanings are shared. This implies, as you say, the ability to indicate things, objects, situations, to oneself, and thus it presupposes a self, self-awareness or self-consciousness.

Your remarks about understanding the individual as an integral part or phase of an ongoing ever-changing process are most important. It is amazing how few psychologists even understand that there is no stimulus apart from a response, that the entire social act is the unit of existence. I suspect many social scientists

are still influenced by the old claim that atomic units have meaning and reality apart from a system. . . .

**HERBERT BLUMER (May 7, 1979):**

I read your thoughtful article on Mead's "generalized other"<sup>1</sup> with a great deal of interest and profit. Because of the central importance of this concept of Mead's I have a number of questions that I would like to pose to you . . . to get the benefit of your knowledge and reflection. For purposes of convenience, I will number the questions.

1. How do you regard and treat the "generalized other" when one is required to speak of the *voices* of the community? It is evident that in many societies, particularly modern societies, the community or the society does not speak with a single voice on many matters or in many areas. I am not referring to the existence of so-called sub-cultures (although their presence sets a problem for the idea of a generalized other) but instead to the divergent views, beliefs, and values to be found among the *same* segment of the population. The difficulty to which I am referring becomes even greater when there is a shifting back and forth in position of a given society or community with a flow of changing events. I am raising a . . . question . . . first as to whether there is a "generalized other" under these circumstances and, if so, how [one proceeds] to identify the generalized other under these circumstances. In reference to this situation of many inconsistent community voices, one could say, of course, that they constitute different and diverse generalized others, or that a genuine generalized other is in the process of formation without yet having achieved form, or that the generalized other in the situation is limited to the formal rules which people may observe as they pursue acts which are otherwise uncoordinated. I do not find that Mead dealt with this matter of divided, contradictory, or uncertain "voices" of the community. What is your thought on the matter?
2. Let me preface my second question with a brief observation. For me, the outstanding or grand merit of the idea of a "generalized other" is that it stands for, or represents, the community rather than constituting the social component of the person's makeup. This is what Mead had in mind in speaking of "taking the role of the generalized other"; he meant that the person could *address* himself from the standpoint of the generalized other or approach himself from that standpoint. But this idea carries with it quite clearly a recognition that one stands over against the generalized

other and thus raises a question as to how one responds to the generalized other from which one addresses himself. In many and perhaps most instances one responds by carrying out what the generalized other outlines, suggests, demands or requires. Yet, theoretically, there are other instances in which the person may scrutinize, analyze, and evaluate the generalized other (i.e., the voice of the community) and develop a line of action different from that outlined by that "voice"; the fact that he stands over against the generalized other would allow him, theoretically, to do this. (Incidentally, this is different from the novelty of an "I" response to a "Me.") How do you handle this part of Mead's scheme which, in allowing a person to approach himself in the role of another, permits that person to identify, analyze, and judge what he presents to himself in that approach?

In a moment I want to extend this question into a third question, but before I do so, let me insert here a few remarks about what I believe to be the great contribution of Mead's idea of the "generalized other" as contrasted with the customary and widespread way in which sociology, social science, and psychology seek to handle the "group" part of the individual's personal or psychological makeup. The customary way is to think that what is characteristic of the group comes to be implanted in some way in the organization or makeup of the individual; thus through some kind of a learning process one comes to acquire the ideas, beliefs, values, and dispositions of the group, or as the sociologist usually describes the matter the individual "internalizes" the values, norms, and sanctions of the group. With this picture of the person having a "group" component in his makeup, it is then thought by the sociologist or psychologist that one can explain relevant kinds of behavior of the person by saying that the behavior is an expression or release of this implanted organizational deposit or component. In my judgment, Mead's idea of the generalized other stands fundamentally in contrast to this widespread sociological and psychological position, in that the generalized other is not an implanted content that merely awaits release; instead it is a *role* from which one can approach oneself. The role that one takes should not be confused with a "deposit" in one's makeup that is the result of previous role taking. The "generalized other" stands for the group to which one has to adjust and is not some stuff that has been implanted in one's makeup. The generalized other comes into being and operation when the actor has to identify what is taking place in an actual situation, i.e., he has to ascertain what the other participants in the collective act are doing or likely to do. This taking of the role of the collectivity in the ongoing social act is different from

expressing or releasing some body of social residues that have been previously deposited in one's personal organization.

3. One might answer the second question, above, by saying that a person is able to dissect, question or challenge what he presents to himself as he takes the role of a generalized other, because he takes the role of a generalized other that transcends the given or conventional generalized other of his group; thus (to use one of Mead's favorite references), a scientist who notes an exception to an established scientific proposition may be thought of as approaching himself from the standpoint of a different generalized other that transcends that of his scientific community. Now, to adopt this line of argument is equivalent to admitting that a person may construct a generalized other that is different from the organized perspective, thought, or activity of his community—a generalized other that at least for the time being belongs to no one else. How do you handle this possibility, namely, that one can "cut out" a generalized other from community life that is different from generalized others cut out by other members of the community?

Needless to say, I would be gratified to receive your thoughts should you have the interest and opportunity to reflect on the three major questions that I have raised above. As I have said, I may not have been too adept in the way in which I pose the questions. But I think that the questions are genuine. The questions (if they are genuine) do not lead me to reject Mead's idea of a generalized other; to the contrary, they constitute a challenge of the greatest importance to the clarification and improvement of that idea. This is why I am anxious to get your thoughts. . . .

**MILLER (June 7, 1979):**

I want to discuss the questions you raised about Mead's generalized other in your letter of May 7. First, let me state what I think are basic assumptions made by Mead and defended extensively in his writings.

1. The social component of the mind of an individual is essential to and constitutive in part of each and every mind and self.
2. Eliciting in one's self, by a gesture, the same (functionally identical) response that one evokes in an other means taking the role of the other, being in the perspective of the other. This is the first step in developing a mind or a self, it is the first ingredient of mind, and when it happens it

means that the individual breaks out of a present (specious present) . . . [and] is aware of what is likely to happen later, . . . aware of the oncoming phase of the social act.

3. Awareness always refers to what is not present in immediate experience, and awareness is possible only because the individual can use significant symbols, which ipso facto also means one is in the perspective of the other, or the meaning of the situation at hand is the same for the participants in a social act.

If we go back to (I), I believe it implies that unless the individual shares meanings with others, unless he has this social component of mind, he has no mind. If he loses the social component, he has lost his mind.

I believe it implies, further, that the child is first in the perspective of the other before it is aware of itself as a subject, before it is aware of the "I" component of the self. (This is supported by the claim that the tribesmen feel security in adhering to fixed moral precepts and they do not make such a sharp distinction as we do between the individual and the group.) If so, then every private point of view, every private or personal perspective is dependent upon a shared social perspective for its existence. There is no private perspective unattached to, unsupported by a shared perspective, sometimes called public opinion or a generalized other, though a private perspective is something in addition to the shared perspective.

I believe it follows necessarily that no one, short of losing his mind, can at will or by any other means step entirely outside a social perspective and examine, evaluate, or criticize that perspective from a purely private point of view. I know this is a severe claim, but I think it should be taken literally. In effect it means the "I" cannot operate apart from the "Me" which includes the social. . . .

I am of the opinion that role-taking requires concepts, not simply images. Thus when the child makes a request to the mother it knows the meaning of the response to be made by the mother, and this requires that it have "in mind" the form of the habitual, customary, rule-like way in which the mother will respond. That is, it has a generalized way of anticipating the response. It has the universal, which covers many different actual and possible responses *of a kind* made by the mother. It has in mind the rational way in which the mother should respond. The rational is the customary, habitual, generalized way, abstracted from (but applicable to) any particular act of answering a request. When the child says "my mother," then it has the concept of mother in a wider, more inclusive sense. . . . "In abstract thought the individual takes the attitude of the generalized other . . ." MSS-155 [Mead, 1934]. I believe any role-taking requires abstraction, it requires

a concept (the general). Mead did not discuss this point, but I believe it is consistent with and necessitated by his position.

So far, I have considered cases in which the individual accepts the customary way of behaving and the roles others are supposed to perform under ordinary conditions. But there are at least two other kinds of conditions involving (1) unusual or new kinds of situations and (2) different and conflicting interpretations of what is expected of one's self and what is expected of others, or different interpretations, by different persons, of the generalized other.

New Kinds of Situations: You say, correctly, "Mead's idea of the generalized other stands fundamentally in contrast to this widespread sociological and psychological position, in that the generalized other is not an implanted content that merely awaits release; instead it is a *role* from which one can approach himself." [Non-Meadian cultural, psychological, and social deterministic perspectives] in effect assimilate the "I" to the "Me" and leave no room for the creativity (reflective intelligence, symbolic interaction) of the individual. For this reason I have for years held that the "me," the generalized other, has the function of holding the individual within the bounds of reason and requiring that his new ideas be continuous with the past. But also, and especially, the generalized other, the "me," is a servant to a healthy minded person. Insofar as we stress democracy, individual initiative, self-actualization, we must think of the G.O. as being servant to the "I." Thus, as you say, "the generalized other is a *role* from which one can approach himself." I think we should make clear that when we speak of the "voice of the community," we mean attitudes, beliefs, ways of behaving, that are shared and approved by members of the community and especially that the individual who listens to that voice is also a member of that community—his voice is included; his attitudes, etc. are included.

At least in reasoning, the individual uses that part of the generalized other [G.O.] that he has, up to date, subscribed to. . . . [W]hen "normal" habitual behavior is frustrated . . . the individual has the opportunity to think, and thinking is a conversation of the "I" with the "me," the G.O. Where the individual has personal problems, he also may develop a private perspective, or begin to look at things from a point of view not fully shared by the community. At this juncture the question is . . . What is the functional relationship between the "I" and the G.O. in the construction of a new idea, a new way of behaving, a new habit, so as to permit the impeded action to proceed in such a way as to achieve personal ends or values that are consistent with if not also shared by members of the community?

As stated earlier, no individual can step outside the entire old G.O. He can question only a part of it at a time, and he must perforce retain most of it, that

part which is in fact more basic, that part members of the community (including the individual) are unwilling to surrender at present at least, that part which in fact gives significance to the private perspective inasmuch as the private can exist only if supported by the part accepted by all. . . . [T]he private stands over against only a limited part of the old G.O. To give up the entire G.O. would be to lose one's mind. Luther said "Here I stand, alone, I can do no other." But we recall that he believed he had God, if not the Church, on his side. . . . Also, Luther was not satisfied without a community of followers. He changed the old G.O., but not all of it. I believe Mead holds that by reflective thinking . . . we continually change the G.O., but only piece-meal, so that there is a continuity between individualism and social change that builds on the past and uses the G.O. as a servant to an open, progressive society of open selves. . . . This brings us to a consideration of how and to what extent the G.O. can be reinterpreted or interpreted in different ways by different people.

Interpretations of the Generalized Other: . . . I think it is clear from what Mead says that the individual uses the G.O. as "a role from which he approaches himself." I think the individual does so only when he is confronted with the question: What ought I do (or not do) under present circumstances? How should I interpret the situation at hand? As I suggested above, it may be a matter of simply conforming to the mores in a sort of habitual, customary way. If there were no new kinds of situations (which is not possible) then one could simply live by custom and habit. But the individual reflects and consequently uses the G.O. when he has problems not solvable by resorting to old ways of behaving. Thus the most significant function of addressing oneself from the standpoint of the G.O. is when it is used in reconstructing action so that the social process can continue in a satisfactory way. This always calls for an interpretation of the G.O., an interpretation quite often different from previous interpretations in that the G.O. is now called on to aid one in the new kind of situation. Even in forming new habits or customs, we use our past and other habits as a basis for the new. As Dewey says, we use a part of our past to get rid of other parts and to form new practices. And Mead said we always justify the new by going back into the past, basic historical practices or principles. E.g. Lincoln justified his freeing the slaves by the deeply rooted national claim that all men are created equal. Every precedent set by court judges is purportedly a conclusion drawn from basic principles subscribed to by all. These principles are a fundamental part of the G.O. . . .

I think Mead was concerned with how the individual can re-interpret the G.O. or have an enriched interpretation of it and still maintain continuity with it. Self-actualization for him meant continually enlarging the "me," adding new skills, new customs, sharing attitudes with a larger community and, to that extent,



becoming more rationally minded. But never can one do that by stepping completely outside the G.O. . . . The individual is the means by which the G.O. is changed from time to time. If the voice of the individual, the dissident say, is heard and subscribed to by the community, the new idea with its corresponding attitude or plan of action has to be coordinated and reconciled with basic attitudes contained in the old G.O. even if these attitudes now have enriched meaning. As I see it, Mead was trying to show how this reconciliation takes place by invoking the principle of sociality. PP [Mead 1932, *The Philosophy of the Present*. Ed.]. The individual, having a new kind of problem and thus having a new perspective, is both in the old perspective and in the new. He is in both perspectives at once. The old is the G.O., the new is a new attitude toward a new kind of situation. Reconciliation takes place when there is a coordination between the two and, as [Mead] says, this coordination requires that the old must adjust to the new and vice versa. Thus continuity and rationality are sustained due only to this dialectic process effected by a conversation between the "I" and the "me."

[M]any social scientists have, as you say, interpreted Mead's social theory of mind to mean the individual is culture bound and simply reacts to situations in a culturally predetermined way. But I am confident Mead's theory shows how it is possible for the individual to be the instigator of new changes, how he can help determine his own destiny and that of society. This functional relationship between the "I" and the other explains how both factors, the "I" or private perspective, and the G.O. are coordinated in the solution of problems by reflective intelligence carried on only by individuals.

Granting that the G.O. is a role from which one can approach (address) himself, I think it is clear that it must lend itself to being used, interpreted, in different ways. It must be flexible, open, used as means for accomplishing different kinds of ends, even as a cabinet maker's tools may be used in various ways. . . .

Now at any particular time the individual uses the G.O. to approach himself, it is limited to those roles relevant to one's present activities, though other roles may be in the back of his mind. [For example,] one, in an emergency, may need a doctor. What has puzzled me for some time . . . is how, in relation to the G.O., can we define "personality." . . . I don't see how those who believe that the "G.O. is an implanted content that merely awaits release" can account for personality at all, let alone differences in personality. It seems to me that personality depends upon reactions made by the "I," and although we are never certain how the "I" (a particular "I") will respond, there is enough consistency and continuity between and among the various particular responses to the G.O. to warrant saying that the individual has a personality. . . .

**BLUMER (July 6, 1979):**

The more I think about Mead's concept of the generalized other the more I am led to believe that the concept stands for a "mechanism" of adjustment rather than for a given organization of one's society. Members of a given society may differ significantly in the generalized others that they may use but they are alike in that they do form and use generalized others. Put simply, human beings have to take the role of abstract arrangements in order to adjust to one another but the content of these abstract arrangements may vary very markedly. Let me try to spell this out a bit.

The basic mark of a generalized other is that it is an abstraction of an organization of roles or relations between people. What is the organization of roles or relations from which the abstraction is made? In seeking to answer this question in what I think is the spirit of Mead, I note at least six of such organizations (I call them "levels"), each one of which suggests a different idea of what makes up the generalized other. The six are:

1. Taking the role of abstract human group life as such, without regard to the specific content of that group life. This is the kind of role taking that gives rise to rational and logical conduct as such, the kind of role taking that enables members of very different cultural societies to develop some understanding of each other. It is an abstract role which transcends the distinctive peculiarities of each human group and enables what Mead would speak of as rational thought and discourse as such. To take this abstract role is to address oneself from the standpoint of the fundamental logical framework that exists in the case of human communication as such, irrespective of its cultural content.
2. Taking the abstract role of one's own society, namely, to take the perspective that is common and shared in a given society. Here, the generalized other is an abstraction of the common meanings of the society—the institutions, values, principles, guide-lines and objects which are shared alike by the members of the society, in other words, the already established organization of the society. This seems to be the way in which the term "generalized other" is most frequently used by students of Mead. It seems to be close to what you have in mind in setting the generalized other over against the "private perspectives."
3. Taking the abstract role of one's particular segment or circle in a society. This kind of abstract role reflects the organization of group action in specialized areas of group life, e.g., black ghettos, the entertainment world,

the academic community, and the Catholic priesthood. The abstract role or context differs from one to another of these specialized areas and hence would yield a different generalized other.

4. Forming and taking an individualized slant or version of an abstract role of one's society (No. 2 above) or of one's special circle (No. 3 above). In this case, the generalized other formed by the given actor would differ in some respect from the abstract role that is held in common in the society or in the special circle. This form of the generalized other would reflect what you have acknowledged to be a possible different or new interpretation of the generalized other.
5. Taking the role of the participants who are involved in the given concrete situation to which one has to adjust. This is the kind of generalized other that Mead deals with in his discussion of the game stage in the formation of the self; for example, the abstract complex of roles that the baseball player has to take into account in the actual game situation. In this use, the generalized other would shift from one situation-arena to another, e.g., from the baseball game to a church wedding; a participant would have to make an abstract "crystallization" of a different set of participant roles for each situation-arena.
6. Forming a *unique* version of the complex of roles in a given situation-arena so as to give rise to an "individualized" or somewhat different generalized other for the given situation-arena.

In some sense or to some degree, each one of the above six conceptions of the generalized other is valid, yet each gives a different content to the generalized other. To select any one of the six as the definition of the generalized other is to get into trouble—what is to be done with the other five abstractions which seem to be genuine in human experience? To lump them together in some kind of a master-conception of the generalized other is to create a new set of seemingly insoluble problems. . . . If the six uses are valid, how is one to handle the concept of the generalized other? . . . I want to acknowledge the thoughtfulness of your observations that (a) a private perspective necessarily presupposes a shared public perspective as a background; (b) cultural or social deterministic schemes sadly misrepresent human conduct; (c) all role taking unavoidably requires abstraction; and (4) Mead's treatment of the "present" and the "past" provides an excellent means of understanding the process of change in human society and brings to light the role of the individual as an innovator. I agree fully with your incisive discussion of these matters. I think, however, that they still leave behind the above questions concerning the generalized other.

You ask about the relation between "personality" and the "generalized other." I assume that you are led to see a problem here because of the following reasoning: even though individuals in a society have the same generalized other, they differ from each other in discernible traits of behavior, such as being grouchy, cheerful, boring, pessimistic, etc. Thus one can ask how this incongruence is to be explained. You are inclined, I sense, to answer the question by attributing "personality" to the play of the "I." In my judgment, the problem is much more complicated. Without seeking at all to propose a full discussion, I think that there are several observations that are in order.

*First*, one should recognize that *personal* relations are inevitable in human societies, giving to human group life a *personalized* dimension. This personalized dimension is represented by personal pronouns—I, You, He, She, They, and We. This personalized dimension is different from the cultural dimension and the social structural dimension. Social scientists are woefully deficient in that they do not even see this personalized dimension, much less study it. (To the best of my knowledge, Kurt Riezler is the only author who has sought to analyze human society in terms of the personal pronoun—see his much neglected work, *Man: Mutable and Immutable*.)<sup>2</sup> The personalized dimension of human association exists legitimately in its own right and is not a product or mere expression of the established meanings in the group. One can see this in comparing personal relations with social roles. Every social role, while laying out a given mode of conduct, permits a considerable latitude in the personal expressions of that conduct—a loan officer of a bank may be friendly, withdrawn, aggressive, humble, energetic, lazy, etc. Or think of the wide variety of personal traits among professors, or among mothers. While a social role unquestionably rules out certain traits (e.g., a priest is not likely to be rowdy-like in his role) the role always allows its occupants a range of personal modes of expression; we are thus forced to recognize the existence of personalized relations in human societies and that the behavior of people in these relations is not fully prescribed by rules and understandings.

*Second*, I believe that the characteristic personal (or personality) traits of individuals are formed primarily by experiences inside of the framework of personal relations. . . .

*Third*, one should also note, I think, the important part that is played by the "situation" as to whether or not personal traits are to be expressed. Given situations can easily lead a person to withhold the expression of traits which we otherwise associate with the person. This "control" by the situation over personal behavior is by no means to be traced to the dominance of the generalized other that is applied to the situation; the situation may be interpreted by the given actor in such a way that the line of action which he decides to follow is contrary to *both*

his ordinary personality and the rules and expectations prescribed by his group. I mention this possibility to call attention to Mead's thoughts on "emergence." I suspect that we would find the *emergent* character of situations to raise some serious questions about the nature of the generalized other as usually conceived. At any rate, the concept of the social situation has to be brought into the picture when dealing with the idea of personality. Indeed, there are other matters beyond the three points that I have made which complicate the problem as to the nature of personality.

MILLER (January 18, 1980):

I have no quarrel with your six "levels" of the G.O. But before discussing them let me state what I think Mead wanted to evade in his use of the term. First, he did not believe the G.O. is a transcendent, absolute perspective . . . that is there apart from individuals and one which they can have if they see things as they "really are." Rather, just as selves and minds emerge from social biological behavior, so perspectives, including the G.O., emerge from human social behavior only after the use of significant symbols or after individuals are able to share meanings of significant gestures, language gestures. . . . Probably the G.O. at the most primitive level involves the awareness of a habit of response. To repeat myself, a concept refers and applies to actual particular instances, but also to possible instances that may never occur. They are open and general. Even the conception of a habit leaves room for the habit to be carried out in many different ways. If one has a concept of customary or habitual ways of responding to a situation, ways shared by the community, then the G.O. is enlarged, so to speak, or one is aware of the mores. . . .

The G.O. . . . serves as a guide (a sort of social control, a censor probably) and gives freedom to the individual, inasmuch as he could not exercise reflective intelligence without it, and thus could not be creative without it. . . . [T]he individual perspective cannot exist in isolation apart from the G.O., but only in relation to and over against it. . . . Individuality and personality allows for enriching and modifying the G.O., which is open in two senses: not final or fixed, and applicable to different possible kinds of situations not yet experienced. Just as in a game of chess, say, there are many possible alternative moves consistent with the rules and made within the rules, so the G.O. does not hold a control mandate over the individual. In fact I think it would be inconsistent with Mead's view to contend that everyone should or can use the G.O. in the same way. That, I think, would leave no room for the "I," nor for reflective intelligence. . . .

In this connection, you mention in (5) that the G.O. applies to different kinds

of situations or there may be different G.O.'s for different situations. I think that is true and important, [and] in a given culture these situations may be somehow linked together or integrated so that a more abstract G.O. covers all of them. But I think it should be pointed out that no two situations are precisely alike and we are continually confronted with a novel element in experience. . . .

Your level 6 is, it seems to me, very important in that it leaves room for individualism or for the place of the individual in re-interpreting, enhancing, and modifying the G.O. After all no two individuals, even identical twins I am told, are precisely alike. There are many biological, physiological, mental, or psychological, as well as genetic differences. But each individual must begin with these native differences as a basis for developing a self and a mind. . . . As I see it, one of the problems in Mead's system not fully worked out is the functional relationship between the uniqueness of individuals, including personality differences, and the G.O. However, I am confident that his system leaves room for, and he intended it to, individual differences and individual personal achievement. But the individual can be as himself (not as another), he can do "his own thing" so to speak, have a personality, but only in relation to and with the aid of the G.O. The two go together and are integrally functionally related. The G.O. is servant to (as well as councilor, stabilizer, possibly a restrainer—even as rules are) the "I," and is also modifiable by an individual. I do not think this notion has been worked out adequately. . . .

**MILLER (May 28, 1980) and Blumer (May 5, 1980):** [Questions about the generalized other Blumer raised in an earlier (May 5, 1980) letter are integrated into the text of Miller's reply so as to avoid repetition. *Ed.*]

**BLUMER (May 5, 1980) asks Miller:**

The first question is whether in your judgment Mead meant the "generalized other" to refer to what was unified and commonly shared in the society or group, or whether he referred to the totality of action in the society irrespective of whether it was unified or commonly shared. One might equate the generalized other to the "voice of the community," meaning thereby the common meanings and common definitions which are to be found in the community. But there are communities in which there are many voices and differences in meaning and definition. When Mead spoke about "taking the role of the generalized other" did he mean taking only the unified and common posture of the community? Or did he mean that one was taking the posture of the total community whether or not that posture was marked by inner difference and opposition?

## MILLER (May 28, 1980):

According to Mead, what is the *function* of the G.O.?

1. The G.O. is the social component of the self. The child is first in the perspective of the other before it has a private perspective, before it is aware of itself, or before the "I" emerges. The G.O. is necessary for reflective intelligence. To use significant symbols, the individual must use the G.O.; it must take the role of the other.
2. The G.O. is necessary for the unity of the self. The inability to use the G.O. means the loss, in part at least, of one's mind. The unity and continuity of the self depends upon relatively stable attitudes of the community that are incorporated into the individual self.
3. The G.O. is essential for the continuity of the self. A knowledge of what is *customary* in a society or in a group is essential to continuity and for preventing disunity, discontinuity, and disorganization of attitudes of the self. . . . Regarding your questions let me submit the following suggestions. . . .

I am confident Mead did not mean by the G.O. the totality of action in a society. Rather, he referred to the manner in which the activities or roles of individuals are organized into a more inclusive social act, and individual participants in the act must be aware of how the roles are organized.

There are communities within which there are many voices. This can include conflicting voices or many different compatible voices. I think Mead would include both. But first let us consider compatible voices or different compatible G.O.'s in the same community. This "same community," such as the Austin [Texas] community, say, includes many lesser communities, e.g., the school community, the Latin American community, the church community (or the Baptist Church community, the Catholic Church community) the business community, the University community, all particular clubs and associations freely established, etc. Also, such organizations as the Rotary Club may constitute an international community. And we speak of the European Common Market Community. Wherever there is an association there is a corresponding G.O. I believe Mead . . . (MSS [Mead 1934, *Mind, Self, and Society*] p. 157) believed there is a hierarchy of G.O.s [in regard to inclusivity and extensiveness]. . . .

About conflicting voices in the same community[:]. If a situation has been defined by the community, then individual members must (a) act in accordance with the definition (the voice of the community) or violate customs if not the

law or (b) the individual may, through arguments, etc., try to re-define the situation. This is done through reflective intelligence and the symbolic process. . . . [W]henver disputes over an issue are settled by symbolic interaction, the various parties must resort to a G.O. on which they agree. They must argue from the same general or abstract premises. Of course brute force may be an alternative way of settling differences.

**BLUMER (May 5, 1980):**

If Mead intended that the generalized other was to be confined to what was unified and commonly shared in the society or group, did he think that what was unified and commonly shared consisted of (a) what was unrecognized and taken for granted by the group, (b) what was clearly recognized and used, such as rules, injunctions, meanings, and indicated definitions, or (c) a combination of the two? I think that this question is important. If "a" or "c" is acknowledged as the answer (assuming that the question is legitimate) there would be considerable difficulty in identifying the generalized other since so much of it would not be capable of easy detection, *à la* the trouble that [linguists] have with "basic structure." What is your thought on this matter?

**MILLER (May 28, 1980):**

I think (b) is the proper answer, though I would say "clearly recognized or *recognizable*." I would add this for the reason that customs may and often are adhered to by sheer habit. . . . I think the G.O. is something of which individual members of the group are explicitly aware when it is invoked.

**BLUMER (May 5, 1980):**

If Mead did not confine the generalized other to what is unified and held in common by the community but extended it to include divergence in definition and meaning, how does this divergence appear in the generalized role that one takes? I can see, for example, that in a community that is deeply split over an issue[,] a person may take the role of a partisan group and guide himself by that role; however, does such a person catch in his generalized other the divided community posture or merely the partisan posture? The question is, if Mead meant the generalized other to embrace the total community orientation[,] how does this total orientation (if divided) get inside the role taken by a partisan member?



**MILLER (May 28, 1980):**

I think Mead confined the G.O. to what is unified in a community. If there are differences of opinion about how to define a particular kind of situation (or how one should behave when confronted with a situation) then a peaceful solution to the problem requires discussion by resorting to a more abstract G.O. to which they all agree. This leaves room for reflective intelligence, for the creativity of individuals in reforming the G.O., and finally it makes use of the most abstract, the logical universe of discourse.

**BLUMER (May 5, 1980):**

Do you think that instead of identifying the generalized other with the voice or perspective of the community[,] Mead was thinking, instead, of the way in which this voice or perspective of the community appeared or showed up in the individual who was taking the role of the generalized other? There could be a profound difference here. The voice of the community as delineated by a skillful outside observer might be very different from the way in which the voice appeared in the makeup of the individual. A number of important theoretical questions, particularly methodological questions, arise depending on whether the generalized other refers to an organized arrangement in the society (as seen by an objective observer) or to how the individual sees or reflects the organized arrangement.

**MILLER (May 28, 1980):**

I think Mead meant by the G. O, both (a) the voice of the community and (b) the way in which the voice appears in the individual (all individuals) who takes the role of the G.O. I take "the voice of the community" or of the group, to mean simply those attitudes and definitions of situations that are shared by the individual participants. There is no "voice" over and above those of the individual members, no transcendent voice. The "voice of the community" is equivalent to that attitude of the individual toward a situation, that attitude shared by other (a majority?) members of the community. I do not subscribe to . . . the view . . . that the G.O. is how an individual believes others interpret his role or think of him. For there to be a G.O. it must be shared and the same for all who share it. There must be shared meanings regarding situations and roles. Of course there can be and necessarily are times when an individual believes the voice of the community, the G.O., should be changed. But he must have that perspective (though without

necessarily approving of it) before evaluating it. And as stated above, if one is to argue effectively for a change, he must appeal to a more abstract G.O.

I do not think a skillful outsider can, by observing the behavior of people, know for sure what the G.O. is. He may make a good guess, but actual behavior often falls short of our ideals, and the G.O. stipulates how one *ought* to behave, not how he necessarily actually behaves. This is a mistake often made by anthropologists: they believe through careful observation one can know how people believe they ought to behave, or what their ideals are.

**BLUMER (May 5, 1980):**

Do you think that instead of viewing the generalized other as referring to a kind of inclusive organization of the society[,] Mead had in mind only the organization that was involved, so to speak, in the given "social act" in which the individual was participating? One could develop a very strong case for the contention that the actor takes the role of the community only in the form that is presented in the specific social act (Mead's sense of social act) in which the actor joins. Thus, one could say that the baseball player takes the role of the community in the game situation, to the extent to which he observes the rules, definitions, and understandings that the community has for this participation. This contention could be extended to mean that the generalized other always reflects the given social act which is under way and thus would vary with the different social acts. In this sense, the generalized other would not refer to a generalized, inclusive society but, instead, to the specific form of organization involved in the given social act. What are your thoughts on this matter?

**MILLER (May 28, 1980):**

Yes, I think Mead must have thought of the G.O. as applying to given social acts in which the individual is an actual participant. I think there are various G.O.'s that apply to different kinds of situations. Is there an overall G.O. including all others? I suspect so, and it may be in what we may call an ideology, a Weltanschauung, the thought-structure (Malinowski, et al.) of a society, or a Zeitgeist, or, I suspect, Mead's most abstract G.O.

However I do not believe a G.O. is confined to a given social act, or to one's actual role performance. One may ask or speculate about how he or others ought to behave under various imagined or conceivable possible situations that may never confront us. Great novels, for example, may suggest many G.O.'s.

Also, there may at times be a G.O. that is widely accepted by, say, the entire

nation, as was the case during [the] war against Hitler. But in any case, I think the G.O. refers both to actual and possible circumstances and there is a hierarchy of G.O.'s or, so to speak, a hierarchy of voices of the community, the most abstract being the logical universe of discourse. . . .

**BLUMER (July 1, 1980):**

You are clearly right in saying that Mead saw the generalized other as consisting of the organization of roles, perspectives, or attitudes in a social act. Such a conception of the generalized other would mean that the number of generalized others in a society would correspond to the number of different social acts in that society—and that the number of generalized others held by a single actor would correspond to the number of different kinds of social acts in which he was prepared to participate. But, I think that Mead also saw generalized others as embracing large combinations of separate acts. For example, baseball as a sport in our American society is represented not only by the rules governing the playing of the game but also by a diversified arrangement of owners of teams, stockholders, a vast number of non-playing personnel, the development of adjunct occupational groups such as sports writers, fan clubs, baseball players' association, lawyers, politicians, manufacturers of athletic equipment, and many other kinds of groups and organizations—such as we would list in identifying the people who make up baseball as an institution. I feel certain that Mead extended his idea of the generalized other to cover such larger complexes of organization, so that a given generalized other could correspond to a complex social institution, indeed to a cluster of institutions, such as when we speak of the "sports world." . . .

The first question[, therefore, that] I wish to ask is whether Mead's idea of the generalized other also embraced these larger organizations of relations—or put otherwise, as embracing a complex variety of different kinds of social acts. If one answers "no" then one has an interesting problem of explaining how the actor brings together into a workable relation the large number of separate generalized others that he would have.

**MILLER (September 2, 1980):**

. . . I think the answer is definitely "yes," though he does not make this emphatically clear. Yes, I believe Mead intended the G.O. to cover large complexes of social acts—even a society itself or what might be called basic cultural attitudes that are possibly peculiar to a culture. In speaking of "the universe of discourse" I believe Mead meant the most universal (and most shared) G.O. This, I believe,

is similar if not identical with Durkheim's "common sense language"[:] the meaning of the symbols therein are shared by all. Then there are more abstract meanings used in science, say, and in various other disciplines that lie within the larger circle of shared meanings, or we can say they all lie within a wider social, cultural matrix.

**BLUMER (July 1, 1980):**

My second question is whether the participants in a fairly complex social act can have different pictures of the organization of roles in that social act, with the consequence that they have different generalized others as pertaining to that social act. Your position, as I understand it, is that the participants in a given social act will have the same generalized other, i.e., a common understanding of the organization of roles in that act. But is this the case? I have noted frequently in the case of baseball, for instance, that the team manager or coach may have and apply a much superior knowledge of the game than is done by the average player. And I have seen this difference in the possession and application of knowledge between two average players—one knows the rules well and the other knows the rules poorly. Would this not be equivalent to the possession of different generalized others by such participants? . . .

The question . . . is, then, whether in the case of either a single social act or a complex institution, participants may have significantly different generalized others.

**MILLER (September 2, 1980):**

Going back to Mead's main claim that without shared meanings (the same attitude or response by various individuals to a given kind of object or situation) there can be no G.O. nor, consequently, can there be communication by use of significant symbols, I think we must conclude that in a single social act controlled by significant symbols and in a complex social act so controlled, there must be a shared or the same G.O. However, there may be, in addition, a more inclusive G.O. had by some who have superior or more inclusive knowledge.

I think the ideal is that, in the hierarchy of G.O.'s there be consistency and compatibility, and apparently there are often cases of inconsistency between the more inclusive and the less inclusive. Yes, I believe there are many cases of social behavior in which there is an absence of the G.O., or at least the G.O. is woefully inadequate. This applies to all crises and disaster situations such as those related to hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, riots, etc. I suppose also, inasmuch as society

is continuously changing its mores, its technology, etc. there is never a perfect fit between social conduct and the G.O.

**BLUMER (July 1, 1980):**

My third question asks what is the "generalized other" in the case of a social act which does *not* have an organization of roles. It is possible for certain classes of social acts to be lacking in an organization of roles. One class would be "emerging social acts," new acts undergoing formation in which the organization of roles has not been as yet established. What is the generalized other for any participant or for all participants in such emerging social acts? Similarly, what is the generalized other for the participant in the case of social acts that are falling apart? In our modern world, particularly, one may note such emerging and disintegrating social acts. How does the concept of the generalized other fit these two types of social acts (if one can call them social acts)?

**MILLER (September 2, 1980):**

I think this is a crucial question presenting a serious problem for Mead's system, and it cannot be evaded or treated lightly. The problem grows naturally out of Mead's major claims. I have thought about it many times. I believe Mead wrestles strenuously with it in *The Philosophy of the Present* [PP], in trying to show how adjustment takes place whenever a novel (event or situation) arises. His attempted answer, I believe, is in what he calls the principle of sociality by which he intended to explain "the stage betwixt and between the old system and the new." (PP p. 47) . . . I believe your question comes down to this: what is the nature of the process that takes place during the act of adjustment? I believe Mead was seeking for a general answer, one that would apply[,] say[,] to the adjustment that takes place in the emergence of the solar system, or the adjustment of the mutation to its environment and the environment to it, or the emergence of a new idea and a new G.O., which would require an adjustment of the old G.O. to the new and vice versa, so as to preserve continuity between past and present and present and future. I think I see the problem, but after reading Mead's PP many times on the issue, I am still not clear about what he says. I believe Mead wants to answer the question through the principle of sociality. "Sociality is the capacity of being several things at once." (PP p. 49). And ". . . in the passage from the past into the future the present object (the novel) is both (in?) the old and the new, and this holds for its relations to all other members of the system to which it belongs." (PP p. 51). . . .

As far as I know, no one from the Meadian point of view has answered satisfactorily the question: What happens in having a new idea? The idea, had by an individual, if accepted by the group, clearly calls for either a modification, an enrichment, or a rejection of the old G.O. and the acceptance of the new. When this is done, adjustment is the result. I think we can, with Mead, see the problem, but I do not, from his writings, see clearly what the answer is. . . .

. . . Mead accepts evolution, the coming into being of new forms. The new cannot be analyzed out of the old. The new is not simply unfolded from the old. But the old, the past (or an accepted G.O.), serves as a condition for the new. There must be *continuity* between past, present, and future. It is this problem of continuity that bothers Mead. (The ancients, Aristotle and Plato and their followers[,] got this continuity by denying the emergence of new forms, and Augustine found it in a preestablished plan of salvation.) Mead wants to account for the reality of becoming. How can this continuity be established? . . . He wants to show how continuity is re-established after the break occurs, after the act of adjustment is frustrated, cut short of completion. This, with human beings, is done through reflective intelligence, which is a conversation between the old (the established G.O.), the me, and the I. It is the I that detects the frustration and initiates the process of reconciliation.

. . . About Mead's generalized other, I think he did not state in detail what he meant by it, and as a consequence we have to start with what he at least meant and said and work out the further implications of his basic notion. . . . Since the meaning that an object or situation has for us is the response it evokes, then if one is conscious (aware) of the identity of response[,] he is aware of the meaning (of the object or situation) shared by others, and this awareness of the shared meaning (the universal) *is* the generalized other. The generalized other is, consequently, a mental phenomenon; it means grasping an attitude shared by others, and this requires concepts, the general or that which transcends any particular response to the object. But if there are no shared meanings (responses or attitudes) of which the individuals are aware, i.e. if there are no shared concepts, then there is no G.O. These shared concepts must have the same meaning to all who use and understand symbols indicating them.

## Part 2: On Chicago Interactionism

MILLER, on March 6, 1981, sent Blumer a short note mentioning that he had been asked to review J. David Lewis and Richard L. Smith's (1980) *American Sociology and Pragmatism* for the *Journal of the History of Sociology*. In that note Miller says, "I am amazed at the unwarranted devastating remarks they make

about your work." This brief exchange introduces theoretical issues concerning Lewis and Smith's misinterpretation of Mead that they return to later.

BLUMER (March 12, 1981):

Thanks for your letter of March 6. I have not seen the book by Lewis and Smith . . . although I have heard of its publication. I anticipate that . . . [it] would seriously misrepresent my views, as well as the thought of Mead. I say this because of past experience. Lewis [1976] published an article on "The Classic American Pragmatists as Forerunners to Symbolic Interactionism." . . . I was outraged by its gross misrepresentations and so was forced to prepare a harsh reply [Blumer 1977] that appeared in the same journal. . . . If you have the time, you might wish to refer to my reply . . . also to Lewis' [1977] short rejoinder . . . [which] merely repeats misinterpretations. . . .

I hope that you will accept the invitation to review the book. You need not pay any attention to what he may say about me, except if you wish to. But I do hope that you give a critical assessment of what he may say about the views of Mead. In my judgment, Lewis does not understand Mead. If I am right in my judgment, it would be unfortunate if a distorted picture of Mead's thought is passed off in the public domain as an authentic picture. You are, without question, the scholar best qualified to assess renditions of Mead's views. So, I trust that you will give your critical judgment of the book.

BLUMER (April 20, 1981):

On returning to my home after an absence of ten days I found your gracious letter of April 6 and your review of the Lewis-Smith book. I have read your review with great care. It is an exceptionally incisive, clear, and temperate scholarly statement. You have gone to the heart of the Lewis-Smith contention and pointed out that their argument is based on an inaccurate understanding of pragmatism. Your careful delineation of "realism" and "nominalism" shows that Lewis-Smith err in lumping Peirce and Mead together as "realists" over against James and Dewey as "nominalists." . . . Your further discussion of the nature of the "self," as conceived by Mead, is a telling refutation of the authors' line of argument. I find it difficult to understand how they could fail to recognize that Mead saw the self as a process, involving both the "I" and the "Me" in place of being merely a product of a societal organization. . . .

## Part 3: On Self-Interaction

BLUMER (August 11, 1982):

Thanks ever so much for sending to me a copy of your article, "The Meaning of Freedom from the Perspective of G. H. Mead's Theory of the Self." It is an excellent statement. Aside from presenting a thoughtful treatment of the topic of freedom it makes a very helpful contribution to understanding Mead's view of the self, the private perspective, and the generalized other. You bring out very nicely [the fact] that in Mead's eyes the self is fundamentally a *process* of interaction between . . . the "I" and the "me," with each presupposing the other. . . . You see the process [of self-interaction] as taking place between the "Me" as the voice of the community and the "I" as meeting or adjusting to the voice of the community. You correctly stress that this adjustment to the voice of the community is not a mere execution of what the voice says, a blind following of the voice; instead, the individual through the "I" has to devise or work out an adjustment to the voice, in fitting his act into the social act. The adjustment which is worked out may take the form of obeying the voice or community rules; but if so the individual may take alternative routes of following the rules. Or the individual may work out a new or novel response; but to do this he has to accept and use large parts of the prevailing community voice. In this very central or basic way, the "I" uses the "Me" to work out the adjustment. . . .

There is another side to this matter that we have to consider. Even though we recognize that, by virtue of being a self, a human being may set himself over against the community voice, we still have to consider how others will respond to the person who so sets himself apart. Others (the community) may ignore him, brace themselves against him, or so forth. This is just another way of saying that while an individual may work out proposals to challenge and change some part of the community voice, his challenge and proposed changes may get nowhere. This is relevant to the topic of group determination.

Mead's scheme of social interaction among human beings, while clearly allowing for individual innovation, does not explain the fate of the innovation. The social determinists (they are rampant in sociology) would declare that the innovator (or challenger or rejecter of community rules) has no determining control over how others will respond to his innovation, challenge, or rejection. They, the social determinists . . . hold that group processes determine and explain the outcome of the challenge, the rejection, or the innovation. I do not share this deterministic



view which casts aside the self-process as ultimately meaningless or insignificant. . . .

I have been confronted with this problem in my studies of "fashion" in such fields as costume, arts, business, education, and science. In the case of women's evening dress, to use an example, there are scores of new styles introduced at any seasonal opening. These styles compete with one another for adoption. Many of them may be strongly pushed by equally competent promoters, with equal access to areas of public notice, publicity, and prominent endorsement. But only three or four out of the competing scores of styles will survive. What is the "selective" process which explains why these few survive and the others get nowhere? I mention this observation . . . merely to underline that one must take seriously the claim that there are group processes determining what takes place in group life, that cannot be accounted for by the study of the self-process. Nor, incidentally, by the established social organization or the generalized other. The interaction between the "I" and the "Me" does not explain how the result of that interaction in the individual will be received in the community. . . .

[N]either the minute analysis of the self or of the generalized other (in the sense of established organization) or of a combination of the two yields, in my judgment, a satisfactory understanding. . . . [A] satisfactory understanding has necessarily to be based on Mead's picture of the self and of symbolic interaction. Yet, I realize that we do not have a sufficiently clear analysis of the process of interaction in human society to handle what seems to be empirically present. . . . [L]et me point out the following points. *First*, as said above, there is no question that in shifting degree each human being with a self stands over against the community of which he is a part. The result is that his behavioral makeup is not completely a product of his community but is also an outcome of the interaction that he carries on with himself. To understand the human being one has to bring self-interaction into consideration. *Second*, self-interaction provides the means by which the individual may challenge, reject, or propose to change the activities of others. We may refer to the challenges, rejections, and proposals to change, as "stances of opposition" of the actor to the established ways of group action. We need to note that the individual may not actually carry out overtly any of these stances of opposition; this complicates further the task of analysis. *Third*, as stressed above, the stances of opposition of the actor (such as proposed innovations) do not determine or explain the responses of others to the overt expression of the stances; the responses lie in a different realm. *Fourth*, the responses of others to the overt expression of the oppositional stances of the actor cannot be safely ascribed to the existing social organization—the organization of rules, or of social positions, or of roles, or of culture, or of beliefs, or the generalized other.

There are a number of reasons why the existing social organization cannot foretell what will be the response to the overt expression of the oppositional stance: (a) the oppositional stance may be novel, never before encountered and thus requiring the formation of a new response by others; (b) the oppositional stance may call forth conflicting responses from different segments of the community, requiring some kind of accommodation or resolution of these conflicting orientations; or (c) there may be no prevailing organization in the area of the oppositional stance. My point, simply put, is that no already established social organization may be there, to meet the outward expression of the oppositional stance. In such a case, one cannot account for the response to the challenge, the rejection, or the proposed innovation by merely attributing it to the existing social organization. To put this matter somewhat emphatically in a different way, we have to have a scheme of social interaction that goes beyond a mere interaction between the *self* on one hand and an *established* social organization on the other.

The necessary scheme of social interaction has to make room for a self (a socially formed human organism) that is potentially able to take an oppositional stance against others and the community. It also has to make room for a community (or society, or group association) that is not prepared to respond as a single, organized entity to challenges, rejections, or social innovations. What is the nature of this required scheme of social interaction? To me, personally, no one of the many existing schemes of social interaction meets the requirement. I refer to such schemes as cultural determination, social structure determination, structural-functionalism, social exchange, conflict theory, Marxism, socio-biology, psychoanalysis, other psychiatric schemes, motivational schemes, ego-psychology, phenomenology, existentialism, and differing mixtures of these. I find that the closest approximation to what is needed is contained in Mead's thought. He does recognize a self that has creative or divergent potentialities; he recognizes that through the social process of making indications to himself from the standpoint of others[,] the human being can create objects, interpret experience, and construct conduct; he recognizes that this self-process takes place outside of the context of social acts; he recognizes that the social act is an ongoing formation in which participants have to adjust to one another and to the social act; he recognizes that this adjustment process takes place through an indicatory and interpretative process, involving the use of significant symbols. This brief listing of what Mead's scheme recognizes covers, seemingly, the necessary elements for the required scheme of social interaction. But, so far, the elements have not been brought together to yield that required scheme of explanation. One can point out several of the uncompleted parts of Mead's scheme.

One of the weaknesses is represented by the ambiguity of the pivotal concept

of the "generalized other." This very significant and indispensable concept gets into trouble when the alleged social organization which it presupposes is not there. What is one, as a scholar, to do when the "social organization" (as in the contemporary institution of baseball) is highly complicated, highly divergent, with shifting and unclear roles, with much inner conflict, and caught up in an ongoing process of formation, whose outcome we cannot foresee? With all of its indispensability, the concept of the generalized other as left to us by Mead is seemingly inadequate to catch and explain what takes place in a complex, moving and developing society.

Another weakness, it seems to me, is resident in Mead's picture of self-interaction. In my judgment, we are forever indebted to Mead for depicting self-interaction as a *social* process in which the human being is making indications to himself and responding to these indications. I regard this depiction as genuinely one of the great contributions to the study of human conduct and group life. Yet Mead did not do much in the way of analyzing this process of self-interaction. His discussion of the "I" and the "me," while insightful, does not get very far into the process of the individual making indications to himself. To take one example, how do we analyze the process in which the human being has conflicting objects of himself, and is given no resolving definition by the community; suppose he doesn't work out his problem but just carries it along in his self-interaction. How do we explain what takes place in the relation of a shifting "I" to an unstructured "Me"? I mention this not as a criticism of Mead but as an example of the incompleteness of his treatment of the process of self-interaction.

Another ambiguous and incomplete portion of Mead's scheme is that dealing with the "social act." I think that Mead is absolutely correct in seeing group life as a formation of social acts or, as I prefer to say, joint acts—a shaping of a collective act in which the acts of participants fit. Mead's treatment implies that the *process of formation* is centrally important. The process of formation is easy to see and understand in the case of most social or joint acts since most social acts are simple and outlined by clear rules and clear understandings, as in the purchase of theater tickets. However, what is the process (or processes) of formation of social acts which are very complex in makeup, very diversified in terms of participants, spread out over vast areas of space, involving lengthy periods of time, and, above all, being newly forged to meet new conditions—as in the case of a world war? One cannot account for the formation of this latter kind of social act by referring to the application of established rules, or the sharing of the same generalized other, or fitting together already established individual acts. On the whole, Mead's depiction of the social act seems suited chiefly to simple, repetitive, and

ritualized patterns of joint activity rather than to huge, complex, and newly forming social acts. . . .

## Part 4: On Misconstruing the Nature of the Social Act

BLUMER and MILLER engage here in a detailed analysis of the position taken by an anonymous writer in an essay on the meaning of the significant gesture and its role in formation of the act. Miller (1982) presents this statement as an appendix, with the topical heading "Functional Identity of Response," in *The Individual and the Social Self: Unpublished Work of George Herbert Mead*. Blumer and Miller see in it misunderstandings pertaining to those evident in Lewis and Smith's views on the subject.

BLUMER (November 4, 1982):

It is obvious that the appendices [to the class notes on Mead's lectures] contained in your recent book, *The Individual and the Social Self*, represent an investment of an enormous amount of hard thinking, indeed tortuous reasoning.<sup>3</sup> Their author labored long in his effort to make clear the makeup of Mead's "significant symbol"—to free it from ambiguity and give it a solid behavior character. Yet, I do not believe that he has been successful. . . . [M]uch of the current disagreement over Mead's social psychological thought stems from a failure to identify clearly the makeup of the significant symbol. . . .

. . . [I]n my judgment the author does not show that "The idea of a response is a content . . . which can be substituted for the later act" (No. 18, p. 202). This is mere assertion by him and not demonstration. As I see it, the idea and the accomplishment of the idea in action lie in two different realms; the former cannot possibly be a "substitute" for the latter. Having the idea of putting on one's shoes is basically different from the actual act of putting on one's shoes and in no sense can be substituted for it. If the idea were a genuine substitute, one could accomplish the act of actually putting on the shoes by merely having or entertaining the idea of putting on the shoes! . . .

In seeking . . . to show that meaning is "behavioral" the author . . . asserts that the idea becomes "actualized" in the act[,] but I can find no explanation or demonstration of how this actualization takes place. Even if we were to accept a premise that the "idea" is, itself, an early part of the act (the author does not show this)[,] he would still have to show *how* this part of the act gets expressed or converted in the later part of the act. He does not give such a showing. . . .

[I]n my judgment, the discussion in the two appendices does not seem to show (1) how the idea or ideal content is a substitute for the overt response nor (2) how the idea is or becomes a form of behavior. I think that we have to address anew the two basic questions that are posed by Mead's significant symbol. The two questions are: (1) what is the common response which the significant symbol is declared to evoke, and (2) what is the behavioral form of this behavioral response? I would like to address each of these two questions.

**Common Response:** I think that the major difficulty with Mead's statement on the significant gesture is that it does not identify what is referred to as the "response." What constitutes the response in which a common or shared character is supposed to exist? . . . In reviewing the literature I find that the common response may be lodged in any one of the following or in some combination of them: overt action, covert action that is a prototype of overt action, neuro-muscular action, an early part of the social or joint act, and idea or meaning. I want to discuss each of these five areas in which the common response is lodged.

1. *Overt Action.* The overt response to a significant gesture seems to be the most common place in which scholars are disposed to lodge the common response. But I think that it takes only a slight reflection to see that this is impossible. First, the response to the significant gesture may never appear in overt action; this is usually the case with the person who directs a significant gesture to others—he rarely responds overtly to his gesture. Second[,] the overt action[,] in carrying out what the gesture calls for, may vary enormously. . . . Third, the overt response to a significant gesture may be deliberately contrary to what the gesture calls for; for example, a person may deliberately lock a door in response to a demand that he open it. . . .
2. *Covert action.* Another favorite area in which scholars lodge the common response to a significant gesture is that of a covert prototype of the overt behavior for which the significant gesture calls. Thus, the common response is lodged in a "tendency" to act in accordance with the intent of the significant gesture, with this "tendency" representing the overt behavior that would come into being. Frequently, scholars use the term "attitude" to refer to such a tendency[,] or on occasion they may use the term "common role" to represent the tendency. In my judgment, difficulties arise in trying to lodge the common response inside of covert tendencies to act. The covert tendency presumably sketches out the overt behavior that would occur if the tendency were to come to expression. If the tendency is seen this way, as a prototype of the overt act that would come into being, as a mapping out of the subsequent overt action, then the tendency

is fraught by the same difficulties noted in the case of overt action. There would be the same variations and contradictions in the tendencies to act as there are in the overt forms in which the tendencies are expressed. However, if the "tendency to act" is not seen as the prototype of the overt action that takes place but is seen, instead, as one covert disposition that may be inhibited or modified in a covert process that takes place prior to overt behavior, the isolation of this single tendency and its covert play sets formidable difficulties. How is it to be seen and separated in the covert process—something that would have to be done to extract what is supposedly common to all of its instances? . . . I find it difficult to isolate a common line or form of covert action in the greatly varying mixtures of covert action that may occur in the covert rehearsal of what is to be the subsequent overt action.

3. *Neuro-muscular action.* Some of the students of Mead who are inclined to a physiological view of behavior are disposed to lodge the common response to a significant gesture in the neuro-muscular process that is presumably set in play. Thus, the hearing of the request, "Open the door," is supposed to throw into play the same kind of neuro-muscular response. I can find no evidence at all to support this supposition. The varied overt behavior and the varied covert behavior which I have been discussing would have their counterpart in the processes taking place in the nervous system; even pushing a door or pulling the door in opening it would require a different neuro-muscular process. I know of nothing that has been done to isolate and identify a common neural tract in responding to a same significant gesture. . . .
4. *An early part of a larger embracing social act.* I find it difficult to identify this area in which some students of Mead seem to lodge the common response to a significant gesture. Seemingly, their view is that the significant gesture calls for and is a part of an ongoing social or joint act; hence if the maker and the recipient of the significant gesture act in such a way as to allow the social or joint act to proceed, their respective activities make up and share a common part of the social act. This "sharing" would presumably involve taking each other's roles through the medium of a common community role. . . . [This] way of trying to handle the problem of the common response . . . does not account for the instances in which participants understand perfectly well the meaning of a significant gesture yet proceed to act in ways that block or break down the developing social act. . . . I do not believe that the common response in the case of the significant symbol is to be found in the onward movement of the social act.

5. *The meaning or the idea-content of the significant gesture.* . . . The common response is to be found in a *common understanding* of the significant gesture or of its meaning. Both common sense and careful reflection show this to be the case; we would say that the participants have a common understanding of what is meant by the request or command, "Open the door." . . . However much scholars may differ in their analyses of what makes up a "common meaning[.]" they would agree that a shared or common understanding is what Mead had in mind by a significant gesture. . . . I think that we are forced by empirical evidence to recognize that people who have a common understanding of the meaning of a significant gesture may differ greatly in their overt responses, in their covert responses as they prepare for overt action, in their neuro-muscular actions, and in their respective behavior in the early stage of a developing social act. We are presented here with a double tiered sequence of response: first, a response in the form of having a common understanding and *then* a response on the basis of that understanding. The "commonness" lies in the understanding and not in what may be done on the basis of that understanding. The failure to see this, I think, is the cause of much confusion and misunderstanding regarding Mead's concept of the significant gesture.

Behavioral Form of Common Understanding: To lodge the "common response" to a significant gesture in the "common understanding" of that gesture sets the problem of how the common understanding can be put in a behavioral form—as is required by Mead's approach. . . . I think that a simple and correct answer can be given to the question of what is the behavioral form of the common understanding in the case of the significant gesture. The answer stems from the premise that to get the significance of something it is necessary to engage in a form of activity. To form an understanding of something, or to grasp the meaning of something, or to apply an ideal content to something (these are all the same) is to engage in action. What kind of action? Mead has given the answer in his recurrent theme of a process of "indication." To understand something, to grasp the meaning of something, to have an idea of something, to be consciously aware of something, to have a conscious memory of something—is to point out that thing to oneself. This pointing out of something to oneself is . . . a form of behavior which, as Mead recognized, is both individual and social. . . . [I]n forming an understanding of the meaning of a significant gesture, one has to engage in the social act of indicating that meaning to himself. This is true of both the person making the gesture and the person to whom it is directed. The common response lies in the same indication that they are making.

. . . [M]y first contention is that the experience of understanding something is separate from the overt behavior, the covert behavior, and the neuro-muscular activity that one may engage in on the basis of that understanding. My second contention is that this act of understanding something is behavioral, consisting of indicating or pointing out to oneself whatever is being understood. In the case of the first contention, the separate status of the experience of understanding a significant gesture is bolstered by recognizing that the "understanding" or meaning may be conveyed to another in a variety of different ways [ . . . including:] an oral utterance, a non-verbal physical gesture, a written note, a coded message, etc.; the meaning of the gesture is the central item, not the form in which that meaning may be conveyed. The common response lies in the understanding of the meaning of the gesture—not in a "substitution" of that meaning for overt behavior, or in the resemblance of the meaning to overt behavior.

The second contention—that the formation of understanding or the grasping of meaning takes place through a social act of indication—is borne out, I believe, by reflective examination. I am unable to conceive a single instance of understanding something (in the sense of being aware of that thing) that could occur without the person making some kind of designation of the thing to himself. . . . This is what Mead covers in his remarks on "explicit meaning." This designation of the meaning of the significant gesture is necessary on the part of both the maker and the recipient of the gesture. A person who wishes another to open the door has to indicate to himself first that he wants the other person to open the door; correspondingly, the person who hears the request to open the door has to point out to himself what he is expected to do, before he can carry out the request. An act of indication by each is required in the case of the significant gesture. I recognize that there are followers of Mead who would contend that many significant gestures occur without involving any process of indication by the makers or the recipients. These followers would argue that frequently the presentation of significant gestures and the responses to them become automatic habits, being performed, as we would say, without thought. These responses are seen as having the character of genuine conditioned reflexes. I would say in reply to this argument that if the presentation of, and response to, significant gestures became automatic habits, the gestures would cease to be significant and would fall into the category of non-significant gestures. They would become merely responses to the gesture as a stimulus and not responses to the significance of that stimulus. In highly ritualized or routinized situations significant gestures may approximate non-significant gestures but participants still have to be aware of what is happening in order to guide and execute their own participating acts. Without such awareness or indication to themselves of what is happening, the gestures would be



non-significant. I may add that in my opinion, to understand something implies that one is able, however feebly, to make some explanation of that thing to others. One can pick out the thing and present it in some fashion to others. This, of course, is to engage in an act of indication.

In summing up my foregoing discussion, may I say then that (1) the common response in the case of the significant gesture resides in a separable area of a common understanding, and (2) the response is in the form of making an indication.

Implications: I would like to single out two important implications that follow from the summary propositions that I have just mentioned.

*First*, the existence of a body of common understandings in a human society is no guarantee that the activities in that society will conform down the line to those understandings. Common understandings are, of course, indispensable to the existence of a human society. Yet its dependence on them does not mean that they are inviolable as people meet each other in their situations. . . . [A]n understanding of the common meaning of a significant gesture should be seen as separable from the action that may be taken on the basis of that understanding; the recipient of the significant gesture, while catching its common meaning, may ignore the gesture, may carry out in diverse ways what it calls for, or may act contrary to the gesture. This possible incongruity between the common understanding and the subsequent action points to the theoretical danger of trying to equate social action in a society with its body of common understandings. Sometimes the greatest conflicts, the worst dissensions, the greatest clashes in cordial relations may arise despite the sharing of understandings. . . . It is a mistake to fail to see that diversity of behavior may take place on the basis of the same understanding. People act on the basis of how they see and define their situations. The definition of the situation takes precedence over what may be called for by the significant gesture. . . .

. . . [A] *second* important implication of the foregoing analysis of Mead's significant gesture . . . [is] the need to view human society in a way that is fundamentally different from what is customary in social science. The dominant view in social science is that human society is an entity in its own right, with its own structure and its own distinctive modes or mechanisms of operation. People, whether as individuals or as collectivities, are seen as lodged inside of the structure; there, they become the objects through which the forces of mechanisms of the society operate. People are seen as fashioned in this process; in their social makeup they become the products of society, and their social behavior is treated as the expression of an embracing society. This view of society is resident in the conception that a human society is a "culture" or a "social structure"; it is especially stressed in the idea that a human society is a "social system." And, I may

add, it is clearly implied in interpretations of Mead's significant gesture that would regard the significant gesture as not merely invoking a common understanding but as also requiring the participants always to accept and abide by that common understanding.

A very different view of human society is introduced when one recognizes that the initiator and the recipient of a significant gesture *indicate* the meaning of the gesture *and then* indicate the action to be taken on the basis of that meaning. This process of indication, allowing the possibility of choice and diverse response, breaks what would otherwise be the direct determination of action by society. It changes the position of the initiator and the recipient of a significant gesture from being mere agents of a transmitting society to the position of being actors who are confronting, defining, and handling their situations. This does not mean that as actors people are "free agents" to do what they please; the actor's definitions of situations always bear to some degree the imprint of group definitions, frequently to the point where his definition is simply the application of the group definition. But it does mean that the actor, in indicating to himself his own situation as being such and such, opens the way to diverse and innovative response.

I do not intend in this letter to pursue what I see as profound differences between a view that sees human society as a transcending entity that determines the social makeup and conduct of people in it, and a view that sees human society as consisting of individual and collective actors who are using indications to forge action in their situations. I merely wish to show that an analysis of Mead's significant gesture leads to the latter view. This may help to correct what I believe to be inaccurate interpretations of Mead's thought that stem from a misunderstanding of the "common response" in Mead's definition of the significant gesture. . . .

MILLER (December 29, 1982):

I agree with you that overt behavior cannot be a substitute for an idea, even as a particular instance of smoking a cigarette cannot be a substitute for the habit of smoking. However, I believe that what you call "common understanding" and what I have called "shared meaning" elicits an attitude, i.e.,[.] a tendency to act, but the tendency may be cut short of completion, or of overt expression, i.e., the overt act may be inhibited. The "understanding" of a symbol, or having its meaning (which I believe are the same thing), and the ability to inhibit the overt act which it could lead to, leaves room for evaluation, choice, and human freedom. You have mentioned this. . . . This is possible because of what Mead calls "the temporal dimension of the nervous system." . . . I think this is probably the most

important thesis of symbolic interactionism, which you fostered. Also, I believe it is one of Mead's great contributions to an understanding of how choice, freedom, and self-determinism are possible. Also, how society as a whole, through its individual members, can control its destiny ([as far as] possible within environmental limits). Mead, I am sure, was not a determinist of any traditional sort. If a person can condition himself through the symbolic process of indication, that is what he would call self-determinism, and therein lies one's freedom.

... [Y]ou say "the experience of understanding is separate from overt behavior." I would say, distinguishable in thought but not separable in fact from overt behavior, i.e., not separable from past experiences of overt behavior and not separable from suggesting (connoting) possible future behavior. I say this because, as you will no doubt agree, Mead does not want mental phenomena such as the symbolic process to have an existence completely separated from or disconnected from overt behavior. That is, he is not a Cartesian dualist, so he makes a functional difference, not a difference in substance, between the mental and the overt behavioral. They are both *phases* of the process of adjustment. I use the word "phase" as over against "part," so as to preserve the claim that the act is the unit of existence. The word "phase" connotes interpretation, in contrast with atomic parts. I believe you are correct in saying that a significant symbol is one which evokes a common understanding. . . .

I think you have an excellent point in claiming that the understanding (or shared meaning) is a symbolic process of indicating to one's self. It is in a sense separable from overt action. I would say it is distinguishable and it is indeed a separate phase of the act of adjustment. This is absolutely essential if the symbolic process is to mean anything at all and, indeed, if the significant symbol can be distinguished from the non-significant symbol, and if human language is distinguishable from a mere conversation of gestures. As you have pointed out in your previous writings, indicating to one's self is essential to symbolic interaction, and as you suggest, but do not develop in your letter[,] it is the basis for human freedom. I agree that most writers on Mead still do not see how Mead can be a social behaviorist without being a determinist, and most, therefore, seem to think of him as a sort of Watsonian psychologist.

The problem you discuss must be solved if Mead's belief that the self, as well as society, has some control over its destiny, is to be justified. I see this as probably Mead's greatest contribution. . . . Your insistence that the symbolic process of indication is a separate phase of the act of adjustment is most important.

BLUMER (January 20, 1983):

Let me begin by saying that I see no difference between your word "same" and my word "common" as applied to the matters that we are discussing. . . . I am

not concerned about this logical matter in the case of Mead's significant gesture. Instead my concern is about what is being referred to by the term "response" in the case of the significant gesture.

. . . [L]et me identify what I think is covered by the term "response" in the case of a response to a significant gesture. The full response to a significant gesture covers the following three stages: 1) The understanding of the significant gesture, for example, understanding the expression, "Open the door." 2) The preparation for some kind of action, based on applying the understanding to the given situation. This is *covert* behavior. . . . 3) Engaging in some form of *overt* behavior, such as moving to open the door in one way or another, or proceeding to do the opposite[,] such as locking the door. The overt action follows stage two and is based on it.

I think that it is necessary to see the "response" to a significant gesture in terms of this three stage sequence. The failure to do so by many students of Mead is responsible, I think, for much of the confusion and misunderstanding of Mead's scheme of thought. Each of the stages is different from the other two. In the second stage the person thinks about what he should do or might do on the basis of understanding the significant gesture and applying that understanding to his given situation. This "thinking" is different from the mere understanding of the significant gesture. The second stage is different from the third stage, not only in that it is covert, but in that it may not lead to any overt action at all or in that it may include a number of possible overt acts that are thought of but rejected. The third stage, like the second, may have a content which is very different from the understanding that constitutes the first stage. In recognizing this three-stage sequence of response to the significant gesture[,] one should keep in mind that (a) the second stage may be exceedingly brief and simple or it may be very lengthy, variable, and complex, and (b) the second stage need not pass over at all into the third or overt stage.

Using this three-stage response[,] I would like to make the following observations with regard to the matter of "sameness" or "commonness."

- I. All the instances of understanding the significant gesture are the same. This, of course, is required by definition. If participants attached a different meaning to the expression "Open the door," the expression would not be the same significant gesture to them. If the instances of understanding the meaning of a gesture are the same, each can be substituted for any of the others. There is no question that the first of the three stages of response meets the criteria of "sameness."
2. The instances of response in the second stage are not the same. It is easily

possible for persons who understand alike the meaning of a significant gesture to think very differently as to what they will do, if anything[, ] in applying that understanding.

3. The instances of response in the third stage are not the same. The possible *overt* response to the expression "Open the door" can vary a great deal, including an overt response which is the opposite of what the significant gesture calls for. . . .
4. Finally, the first-stage responses and the second-stage responses are different from each other and cannot be substituted for each other. Similarly, the first-stage responses and the third-stage responses are different from each other and cannot be substituted for each other. This is also true in the case of the second-stage responses and the third-stage responses.

If the above reasoning is correct, the only place in which one can find the sameness of response to a significant gesture is the first of the three stages of response. The wide variation to the point of downright contradiction that one finds among the instances in the second stage and among the instances in the third stage eliminates those two stages as the possible locus of the sameness of response. . . .

It is these observations that lead me to lodge the sameness of response to a significant gesture in the first stage and to separate that stage of response from the other two stages of response and also from a posited neuro-muscular activity. Now, I am thoroughly well aware that to say that the common understanding of the significant gesture is separable from the covert, the overt, and neuro-muscular responses to that gesture would cause Mead's followers to shudder. . . . It would seem to be a direct return to Cartesian dualism, to a cleanly divided psychic-physical realm, to a resurrection of a separation between a non-behavioral area and a behavioral area. . . . To the contrary, I see the act of understanding something (for example, understanding the meaning of the expression, "Open the door") as being definitely a type of action, in the form of an individual making an indication to himself. As an act of indication, it necessarily involves and requires both covert action and neuro-muscular activity. As a form of action, indicating something to oneself necessarily means, as Mead would say, engaging in discourse with oneself; and this obviously requires neuro-muscular activity. To separate the formation of an understanding from the subsequent covert and overt responses to that understanding is thoroughly compatible, I think, with Mead's scheme of thought. Indeed, I believe that it is required. One should not confuse the understanding of the meaning of a significant gesture with the thinking and the overt behavior that may follow after getting the meaning.

With the foregoing as a background let me discuss the matters I think require some clarification. First, let me refer to your item "4." . . . The conception of a "form of action" which you speak of as giving "the general, the universal character of the act" seems to be the same thing that I am referring to as a common understanding of a significant gesture. Yet you seem to equate this "form of action" to all possible instances of "overt" responses. For example . . . you say that "X and Y experience the numerically identical form of *possible overt acts* (my emphasis)." I find this puzzling since many of the possible overt acts may be definitely contrary to the type of action that is represented by the meaning of the significant gesture. How can your "form of action" handle these negative instances of *overt* response? Isn't one compelled to recognize that the response in the form of understanding a significant gesture may be very different from the overt response made on the basis of that understanding, and thus cannot be identified with all possible overt acts? I . . . raise this question . . . to challenge the widespread notion that the presence of shared significant symbols in a society means that automatically the members of the society will act in conformity with those symbols. Such notion, in my judgement, gives a false picture of human society. . . .

MILLER (February 4, 1983):

I think you are absolutely correct in pointing out that there are three stages in communication by use of significant symbols. (1) Understanding[,] (2) Preparation of some kind of action, (3) engaging in some form of overt behavior.

I think we agree 100% on what happens in the first stage—understanding, or what I have called "sharing the meaning"—having the same meaning.

On the second stage. I believe we agree 100% on this: It is a stage of evaluation, of deciding what to do, if anything, about the understanding. This, I think, is a very important stage—probably the most important—and, as you say, it is mental, not overt. As I see it, without this stage symbolic interaction would have no place to operate. This, as I see it, is what Watson and Skinner left out, but Mead included. It is the basis for choice, human freedom and self-determination, as well as the basis for determining the social process. . . . I take it Mead would argue that the second stage is altogether absent in lower animals. It makes for a different kind of freedom in humans.

The 3rd stage. If the author of the essays meant to say the form of the overt action due, say, to X's response to Y's request, is functionally identical or the same in every instance, that would be a serious mistake. That would mean ignoring the importance of stage 2.

**BLUMER (February 11, 1983):**

I think that we agree on how Mead viewed the matter of response when he spoke of the significant gesture evoking a common response. The failure to understand properly the nature of the common response can lead easily to a misrepresentation of Mead's scheme of thought. In my judgment this is the source of the difficulty in the versions of Mead that have been advanced by Lewis-Smith [1980, 1983] and McPhail-Rexroat [1979].

**MILLER (March 11, 1983):**

At our American Phil. Meeting in Carbondale Ill. last week we discussed the Lewis & Smith book. Lewis participated. You may be interested in [these,] my final remarks (not the main paper) at the meeting [*"Final Remarks," David Miller (May 5, 1983. American Philosophical Association, Carbondale, Ill.):*] It seems to me that one of the main aims of the Lewis and Smith book is to drive a wedge between Blumer and Mead. I believe I have located precisely how the authors tried to do this. . . . Lewis and Smith are saying; For Mead, the meaning and universality of a significant symbol is physiological, not mental. For Blumer, they say the meaning is not universal, but psychical, mental, and individual. For Mead the meaning of a significant symbol is real, objective, universal. Hence, they say Mead is a realist. For Blumer the meaning of a significant symbol may be different for each individual member of society, hence subjective, and this makes Blumer a nominalist, they say.

During the past few years Blumer and I have conferred about several of Mead's views. Within the past two years we have conferred about this very problem; namely, what it means to say a significant symbol evokes in the one who makes it the same response that it evokes in the other to whom it is addressed.

Mead, Blumer, and I agree that the significant symbol evokes in the participants in a social act a common understanding, that is, a conscious awareness of the meaning of the symbol. The meaning is shared, it is universal, an awareness of the meaning is mental. In Lewis and Smith's sense, on this point, we are all realists.

But this common understanding is only the first stage of the social process. Yes, if A says to B, "destroy the tapes," both A and B understand the request. It has the same real, universal meaning for each. But this is only the first stage, and B does not necessarily, out of habit or custom, destroy the tape.

Rather, the second stage consists in B's evaluation of A's request. He considers its consequences and, depending partly on the situation at hand, makes his own

interpretation—his own individual, personal interpretation, and chooses to comply or not to comply with the [re]quest.

The third stage is the actual overt, observable response made by B. Now the most important step in symbolic interaction is the second step, the step in which the individual deliberates, evaluates, and chooses for himself what the third step, the overt act will be. This step is altogether mental.

Without this second stage, there would be no human freedom, no choice, no creativity, no individualism, no self-motivation, and no morality. It is precisely because of this second step that Blumer emphasizes symbolic interaction and the freedom of the individual to make his own interpretation of the request, his own interpretation about what he will do because of the request, whose meaning is universal and the same for all, but whose interpretation may be different. Mead emphasized the creativity and freedom of the individual in an open society.

Only by leaving out the second stage, the stage of deliberation and choice, can Lewis and Smith discredit Blumer's interactionism. By doing so, they also discredit one of Mead's main claims, namely that the source of every new idea, every new hypothesis, every new kind of experience, every new interpretation, comes not from the generalized other, the universal voice of the community, but from an individual member of society. I feel certain about this. The question of realism and nominalism has no bearing on the relationship between Blumer and Mead.

We should be forever grateful to Blumer, in accordance with Mead's theory of reflective intelligence, for clarifying and emphasizing this second stage of the function of significant symbols, the stage of deliberation, evaluation, and interpretation. It is [in] this stage that we find the locus of morality, human freedom, individualism, and the open self, which is the basis for an open society.

One of the greatest moral dangers for each of us is the temptation to follow custom and tradition and even the command of our supervisors, without evaluating the consequences of our action. As Paul Tillich says, many do not have the moral courage to be as themselves, but only as another, the leader. All men cry out for freedom, but few there are who are able or willing to engage seriously in the second stage of symbolic interaction, fostered especially by Mead and Blumer and their students.

**BLUMER (March 16, 1983):**

Your statement is excellent. . . . I like particularly the forceful way in which you show that the "second stage" about which we are speaking, is the very heart of



the existence of freedom. It also lies at the center of Mead's treatment of the mind, the self, and symbolic interaction.

MILLER (March 28, 1983):

Lewis . . . did seem very interested in these remarks and somewhat disturbed. That the first stage is mental seemed to confuse him.

It seemed to me that Lewis and Smith think only about the first stage of the symbolic process, the stage where there is a common understanding. They interpret you as claiming that in this stage each individual participant in the social act attaches whatever meaning he chooses, that, in effect, you are saying significant symbols have no shared meaning. Then they skip the second stage altogether, that stage in which the individual interprets, say, a request, deliberates and considers the consequences of complying, etc.

Also, Lewis and Smith erroneously claim that the first stage is not mental but is simply a non-cognitive response. Their view leads easily to the conclusion that Mead is some sort of determinist, leaving no room for the creative intelligence of the individual. . . .

What I think is most significant about your symbolic interaction thesis is that you place the thinking individual (or thinking individuals) at the cutting edge of *social change*. Here I mean social change that is consciously planned. The cutting edge is, of course, in a present, a period between the past and the future. The individual (or individuals) may use the past or whatever they have incorporated into the self (the "Me") as an instrument, a means for planning, but it does not dictate, compel, nor is it a mandate. It seems that traditionally, and for the most part today, philosophers believe we must go to the past, to some external sort of mechanical causal explanation of behavior, or to the future, some teleological explanation, such as ideals, final causes, etc. They seem to ignore Mead's claim that the locus of reality is a present. As I see it, this is precisely where you place the cutting edge of intelligent social change—in that second stage lying between the first, which sets the problem, and the third, overt action. The present is characterized by novelty. *The individual has to define the new situation*. Adjustment cannot be made out of habit nor do any external conditions dictate the solution. Your thesis that at the cutting edge is the individual thinker, evaluator, interpreter, fits in perfectly with Mead's (*Philosophy of the Present*, 17) statement "even within the field of mathematical physics rigorous thinking does not necessarily imply that conditioning of the present by the past carries with it the complete determination of the present by the Past." . . . Mead . . . claim[s] that the process of adjustment is that phase betwixt and between the old system and the new. . . . It is precisely

here, as I see it, that you place the thinking, reconstructing individual, and this is the cutting edge of consciously planned social change and adjustment. The second stage lies, as Mead would say, betwixt and between the old and the new . . . and that once the new (reconstructed world) is accepted, the old must make adjustment to it. This crucial point, I am afraid, is not understood and probably not noticed by many psychologists and sociologists, as you have indicated. Lewis and Smith miss it altogether. . . .

**BLUMER (April 8, 1983):**

Your characterization of Lewis and Smith is very accurate. They are trying to make the significant gesture responsible, in itself, for all human social behavior. They fail to see that, instead, it provides a meaning which is used by the human being in guiding and shaping behavior. As you put it, they make the significant gesture into the coercive determinant of action instead of recognizing it as the servant of the "I" in a process of self-interaction. If they would take the trouble to examine their own personal behavior they would be forced to see this. . . . I agree with your discussion on the second page of your letter. The individual is, as you say, at the "cutting edge of rational social change." I think that an article developing this point would be much in order. . . .

## Part 5: On Emergence

**BLUMER (May 10, 1984):**

Could I use the present letter to solicit your scholarly judgment on a matter which I find to be obscure in Mead's thought on "emergence"? Isn't it true that in the passage from the past to the future that takes place in the present, everything from the past that is caught in the passage is subject to the emergence process? I have the impression that scholars restrict "emergence" in Mead's theory to what appears as "novel." I am asking if the process of emergence applies also to everything that is caught in the passage, even though a given thing may retain its previous form.

I raise the question because I am increasingly convinced that in the transmission of what is already established in human society (custom, tradition, cultural values, social norms, group rules, etc.), these established things do not continue as such through mere inertia; in order to be retained they have to pass through some kind of a process of affirmation, reinforcement, renewal, or something similar. It is the possible presence and operation of such a process that intrigues me.

It suggests that the retention of fixed forms in human group life is as much an "emergent" as is the appearance of novel or new forms. Do you think that Mead's thought on "emergence" could cover the transmission of established forms from the past? . . .

MILLER (August 2, 1984):

First, there is no past as such or in itself, isolated from a present phenomenon or situation. The past (or a past) never gets into a present unless it accounts for or explains a present, the novel. Or, the function of a past is to account for a present phenomenon or situation: "Its reality (the past) is in its interpretation of a present" (*Philosophy of the Act*, p. 616). For Mead, the interpretation of a present (event, an emergent, etc.) is an explanation of that present[;] it gives an account of how that present came about. To interpret is to systematize the present, i.e., to show how the present, at first a non-rational event, becomes continuous with a past, and hence how it becomes rational and now follows from, in a lawful, systematic, intelligible way, from a past. This novel thing first belongs to the experience of an individual member of society, but is at first unexplained, unintelligible. It is in conflict with the old past in that it does not follow from the old past. This experience of the novel at first belongs to the biography of an individual, and it is what Mead calls, throughout his writings, "an exceptional experience." Exceptional because it is at first unanticipated, unpredictable on the basis of old laws and the old past. Mead was influenced partially by Hegel about his notion of "conflict." For Hegel, the historical process takes place in a dialectic manner, by a conflict between *ideas*, universals. There is one idea, a thesis, and another idea, the antithesis, and this conflict of ideas, and so the process continues. . . . Through reflective intelligence carried on by individuals, this conflict is resolved by a new hypothesis, had by an individual. And the resolution of the conflict calls for a new past which thereby restores continuity, intelligibility and makes the novel rational. . . .

[N]o past gets into a present unless it is changed. Its function is to explain a present (novel) phenomenon, and the old past cannot do that. Insofar as we call on tradition or custom to carry us through a present problematic situation, that tradition or custom must take on new meaning—it becomes different in some essential respect. . . . There are three words that come to mind in connection with the process by which a present novel event or an exceptional experience is found to be consistent with and follow from a past: 1. renaissance, 2. reconciliation, and 3. justification. There is a renaissance, a rebirth of the old past, which means that the old past now takes on a new character. It is *now* the cause, or a part of the cause of the present novel event. . . . And, as you say in your letter, there is a

reinforcement of the past, and a renewal, which means at least giving the past a new meaning. Its new meaning is an interpretation of the present (Problem, emergent). The present (Process) is a hybridization of a new past with the present conflict. . . .

Generally speaking, I think whenever anyone tries to justify any change in tradition, custom, or civil law, he always does so (or should do so), by finding a basis for that change in a past. To change tradition, etc., we must justify the new proposal by showing that the past contains the solid basis for the change. E.g., the voting rights of women, though won through an amendment to the constitution, was claimed by women to follow from "all men are created equal," and women are of equal dignity and worth with men. The amendment had to be consistent with the constitution. The blacks claim they want nothing more than what is guaranteed by the constitution—integration, voting rights, etc. But to now grant them these rights is to give new meaning to the law and to the constitution. The present situation called for a new past—a new interpretation, and the constitution takes on new meaning with every new precedent set by the court.

We cannot *justify* the solution of any social problem without reconstructing the past and giving it new meaning, a transformation and reinforcement.

The words "justification" and "reconciliation" apply, I think, in two different senses. When applied to problems in the physical science, they mean simply a rationalization, or offering logical reasons for the continuity of past and present . . . . But in the human or social sciences there must always be, in addition to a logical justification, a *moral* justification. . . . I believe Mead held firmly that the physical sciences offer the means, the mechanism for achieving social goals based on moral grounds, though he did not believe morality came from a supernatural source. He held that we were not born into a moral order, but our moral order (though it may vary in different cultures) is constructed by man. . . .

Mead speaks of that reconciliation of the novel and the past as the principle of sociality (PP p. 86). Reflective intelligence is a conversation between the "I" (the new experience or idea) [and the generalized other (G.O.)] . . . [T]he G.O. must "give" in some respect—it is changed to fit the new, the new is not ruled out as unreal because it does not fit the old G.O. A new hypothesis by a physical or a social scientist is in conflict with and attacks only a part of the great body of knowledge included in the G.O. In fact it can be tested and found to be true only by reconciling it with what is not attacked in the G.O. The heliocentric view left untouched many beliefs about the sun, the planets, their relative positions, the time of the eclipses, etc. . . .

When it comes to the resolution of social problems, again I think they occur when there is a conflict between old ways of behaving and the new situation. E.g.,

with the automobile we could not carry on satisfactorily by resorting to regulations applying to transportation by horses. A whole new set of regulations had to be instituted, and ones that answered to the traditional needs of the people as well as to present conditions. . . .

It seems to me that sociologists, or some of them at least, should devote their time to a consideration of the resolution of conflicts that continually arise in the social process. To have social causes or to foster social programs, one must *justify* them by instituting a new past, by making tradition adjust to the new situation, and this means that the past has a re-birth and, to that extent a re-inforcement and is re-newed. Sociologists should know the method by which justification of their causes is made.

Again, I should not forget that Mead is a process philosopher. The real is in a present—it is a process of adjustment, of reconciliation, or justification, and the past is brought into the conflict. It emanates from the conflict, from a present, a resolution of the conflict enables us to plan the future. If there were simply a repetition of things, a sort of monotony, there would be no conflict, and the past would have no meaning. There would be no passage. The novel gives rise to the conflict. The main function of pasts is to restore continuity between past, present, and future. This restoration gives us a sense of security (we are in tune with reality) and a sense of belonging to a moral order and of being part of the historical human social process, a part of the human race.

BLUMER (Sept. 18, 1984):

. . . Your statement of Mead's view is excellent and confirms my impressions of Mead's thought on the topic of emergence, particularly the relation between the past and the present. Your statement ought to be expanded into a scholarly article. . . . The only person I can think of who might be free . . . who might assist you in preparing such an article . . . is Oscar E. Shabat<sup>4</sup> of Chicago. You have met him. He is well qualified—he brings an enormous amount of administrative experience of our emerging world to his scholarly interests. . . .

. . . In my judgment current social science and psychology need to see human group life not as a product of an established past but as an adjustment to an emerging future. I think that this latter perspective is sadly missing in social science theory; the history of social science theory is against it. My major preoccupation during the last few years has been with this matter. I am trying to map out a prospective book to probe into this matter under an analysis of the "social situation." I am doing this with the aid of a younger scholar, Professor Thomas Morione of Colby College, Maine.

I hope that both Mrs. Miller and you are well. My warmest regards. Let's keep in touch.

## Notes

1. Prior to this letter Blumer had received a draft of Miller's paper entitled "Mead's Generalized Other, Normalcy, Insanity and Crime." *Ed.*

2. See Herbert Blumer. 1952. Review of Kurt Riezler. 1951. *Man, Mutable and Immutable: The Fundamental Structure of Social Life*. Henry Regnery: 1951, in *American Journal of Sociology* 57: 598–600. *Ed.*

3. Miller wrote to Blumer on September 2, 1980, saying, "The class notes by Mead that I submitted to U. of Chicago Press for publication are: 1912–14 notes on social psychology; 1927 notes on social psychology (quite different from MSS); notes on Mead's last course, Winter, 1931, on Problems of Philosophy; notes taken by myself (Mead did not finish the course); and two very fine essays on 'The Functional Identity of Response' and 'The Functional Identity of Stimulus.'" See also, Morrione (1983) for a review of this volume. *Ed.*

4. Blumer (Letter: April 8, 1983) wrote Miller saying that Oscar E. Shabat "was one of my superior graduate students at the University of Chicago." At the time Blumer made this suggestion he noted that Shabat was "Chancellor of the City Colleges of the City of Chicago." He and Blumer conferred on both scholarly and administrative matters often over the years. *Ed.*

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# Appendix 2

## SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS



### ITEM 1: The Nature of Meaning [Blumer, undated notes. Ed.]

What is meaning in terms of human conduct? What is it that we speak of when we say that an object such as a book, an automobile, a parliamentary assembly, a school, an earthquake, a divorce, or a love affair has meaning? We recognize that each one of these objects has a character that makes it the particular kind of thing that it is—a character that distinguishes it from other objects. In our eyes an automobile is not a parliamentary debate, a can of peaches, or a divorce suit. Generally, one would say that an object, such as those mentioned, has two kinds of meaning—(a) a general meaning that is intrinsic to the object, making it what it is, and that consequently is the same for everybody—this would be the “objective” meaning of the object; and (b) a personalized subjective meaning that is brought by the person to the object. Some such notion of meaning underlies the posture of Science. Science seeks to identify the object in terms of its intrinsic or general meaning—this reflects the objective stance of science. Science seeks to pare away the personalized or so-called subjective meaning. This widely accepted distinction between objective and subjective meaning is open to serious question for several reasons. One is that, contrary to premise, the so-called objective meaning is not fixed but is, itself, open to reformulation and transformation, as in the case of the objects of science—for example the star, or cellular tissue. While an object has to have a point of constant reference (as say, stars) the object may undergo a marked change in what it is supposed to be, as a result of scientific study. Thus, its so-called objective meaning undergoes change. . . . A more serious question concerning the validity of the distinction between objective and subjective meaning, as far as human conduct is concerned, is that what is important is the meaning on which action is taken, irrespective of what that meaning may be. Thus, a cloud in the sky may have a significantly different meaning to a meteorologist, a farmer, a vacationer and a child, although it may be a constant point of reference to all of them.



These few observations lead then to a recognition that our concern is with "meaning" in the form that it has for the person or collectivity for whom it exists.

It should be added, perhaps, that an object in addition to (a) having a form of generalized meaning (such as a bicycle or a cloud) for a given group or society and (b) a specific meaning in terms of the particular act in which the individual is engaged, may be no more for a set of individuals than (c) a point of reference. Thus, the object may exist as a common object in the sense of (c) even though its meaning may be very different in terms of (a), just as the object may never be among individuals in terms of (b). An object as merely a point of reference could be illustrated by a tree or a cloud, or the word "communism." Such an object could vary enormously in its meaning for different persons yet be capable of being designated by such persons with a common recognition by them that they are referring to the same given thing.

The existence of an object as a mere point of reference represents the lowest common denominator and has the lowest level of common meaning and the lowest level of actual operating meaning for the individuals for whom the object exists. It does have a meaning even though at a low level; it does enable people to refer or point to the object and thus opens the door to discussion of it and for the exchange of different indications of it.

Another point to be made is that the meaning of objects in the form of situations is especially subject to and caught up in a process of transformation. As we say, the operating situation shifts or develops as the participants in their interaction encounter each other anew and confront new positions, new actions, and possibilities of new actions. Situations as objects are in this sense somewhat of a special class.

Meaning in empirical instances. We presume that the term "meaning" refers to something. To identify and analyze meaning we have to isolate and study that "something." To do this [in] the spirit of empirical science[,] we have to see that "something" in terms of clearly identifiable empirical instances. What are the empirical instances that show the presence and play of meaning? To determine this and to identify what are the characteristics of the class of such instances[,] one has to go to those instances of behavior where language usage signifies meaning to be present.

Using this approach one may have to distinguish between the character of an "object" and the meaning of an object. The first is suggested by the question, "What is it?"; the second by the question "What is the meaning of the object?" or "What does this mean?" The first calls for a description of the object; the second calls for a characterization of the object in terms of a problematic status which the object has in the eyes or action of the actor.

## ITEM 2: Blumer (April 26, 1971) on Mead's Theory of Meaning—A Letter to Professor Peter List

Let me begin by saying that I definitely would not use the writings of Charles Morris as the source for understanding Mead's theory of meaning. In my judgment he did not understand Mead's position; I told him so several times when we were colleagues at the University of Chicago. Charles started with a basic view of the human being as an organism acting in terms of the conventional physiological scheme of stimulus and response. His mode of treatment of "signs" and of the "interpretant" and his reliance on Hull reflects this starting premise. With it Charles gave a cast to Mead's views that I do not believe to be fair or accurate. Charles' conception of "disposition" as given in his definition of the interpretant is not equivalent to Mead's idea of "consciousness of attitude" and does injustice to the latter. For Mead, consciousness of attitude was not a mere disposition or readiness to respond in a certain way—it was an awareness of such a disposition. This is something fundamentally different. . . . I think that the skeleton of Mead's view can be given in the following points.

- I. First of all, Mead distinguishes between "implicit meaning" and "signification" and equates "meaning" to the [latter]. The difference between implicit meaning and signification was that signification was always conscious or, as I will explain later, existed in the form of an indication of something that the actor points out to himself. The acting organism may be engaging in a line of action that has vital consequences to it, such as a cow eating grass; thus, as Mead would say, the implicit meaning of the grass for the cow is food and the implicit meaning of the act of eating the grass is that of satisfying the physiological hunger of the cow. Yet the grass and the act of eating it would have no "significance" or meaning to the cow because the cow does not designate the grass as food or its act of eating as satisfying its hunger. The cow does not make "objects" of the grass as food or of its eating as a means of satisfying its hunger.

This designation of an object as made by the acting organism is the initial key to understanding Mead's view of meaning. For Mead the topic of meaning (significance) always and necessarily must be addressed in terms of the questions of "meaning of what" and "meaning to whom." Meaning does not exist in itself as some ethereal substance pervading the external world; it is always the meaning of some specific thing, or to use Mead's language it is always the meaning of a specific "object" that is being designated. The objects that are so designated by actors consist of anything

and everything that is designated. The object that is designated may be a tool, an article of furniture, a word, a sentence, a lecture, a theatrical play, a quarrel, a divorce, a rising crime rate, a planet, an atom, a horse race, a toothache—in short anything that may be referred to or indicated. Meaning is always “attached” to something; it always arises in the case of something that is indicated. Thus, as I have said above, one has to ask “meaning of what?” Next, one has to ask, “meaning for whom?” To utter a redundancy, meaning exists *only* for those for whom it exists. Thus, a treatment of meaning has to cover the relation between the object that has meaning and the actor who designates the object. If the “meaning” is not of some specified thing and if it is not a meaning for somebody, it just does not exist. Meaning lies in the relation between the person and the object that has meaning for him. Thus, to state this first point[,] “meaning” resides in objects that are designated by actors.

2. To understand the relationship between the actor and an object designated by him one has to see what Mead thought to be the nature of an object. For Mead an object was a plan of action of the actor. By this he meant that the makeup or qualities of an object consisted of the prospective plan of action taken toward the object and of the consummatory experiences that would be had in carrying out the action. Thus, a hammer consists of such actions as grasping the handle and using it to pound something, getting a feeling of the hardness of the handle as it resists pressure of one’s grasping of it, and of seeing and using the hammer in terms of how the hammer has been defined to the actor by members of his group. The meaning of an object can be said, then, to be a compound of (a) the ways in which the object would be used, (b) whatever sensuous experiences are had in such use, and (c) the ways in which the object has been defined, explained, or categorized to the actor by the members of his group. This last item . . . refers to the fact that in forming his objects the person is subject to the ways in which others have designated or defined the objects to him, either by overt performance of action by them toward the object (such as using the hammer to pound nails) or by verbal indications (such as a declaration that a hammer is a valuable tool in the carpenter’s kit). Under Mead’s scheme such definitions or indications made by others become part of the actions of the actor, in the sense that, in taking the roles of others as they made the indications, the actor is, himself, making such indications; the indications made by others thus become indications that the actor can make to himself and enter into his own repertoire of action. To sum up . . . , an object is treated by Mead as consisting of

actions brought into play in the case of the person to whom the object appears. These actions constitute the meaning of the object and are condensed into the individual's perception of the object. This is true of each and every object—whether a hammer, a ghost, a feeling of hunger, the Constitution of the United States, a declaration of war, an ash tray, or what not. The object (anything designated by the individual) exists in its meaning; the meaning is given by the way in which the individual is prepared to act toward the object; the act that the individual is prepared to engage in incorporates the acts of others given in the definition or indication; and this preparation also embodies a sensitization to the kinds of sensuous experiences that would be had in carrying out the act for which the individual is prepared.

Meaning is given by this preparation to act toward the object. Using this idea of "preparation to act" one could say that Mead has a "dispositional" theory of meaning. But one would have to be careful in applying that term to Mead's view; personally I don't like it and don't use it. Certainly for Mead the "preparation to act" did not mean merely an original impulsion, a motive, or an intention. Instead it stood for a readiness to carry out a complex act, the parts of which are already present in the readiness. Unless one sees that for Mead the preparation to act already embraced the complicated act to be carried out toward the object (including discrete forms of action, community, definitions, and sensitization to sensuous experience)[,] one is almost certain to misconstrue him in classifying his view as a "dispositional" theory of meaning.

3. Now another point has to be added, namely, that the preparation to act has to be checked out in order for an object to appear to the actor. If the preparation to act is automatically expressed or called forth in some form of overt action[,], the actor would not be *aware* of objects. Thus, in our behavior we respond to multitudes of stimulations without noting them or being aware of them, e.g., the particular portions of the ground on which we place our feet as we walk along engaged in conversation with an associate. However, if the preparation to act, though aroused, is checked, then the preparation to act can go over into an awareness of the object. This now raises the crucial question of how the checking of the preparation to act, when checked, gives rise to the appearance of an object.

This crucial question brings us to the heart of Mead's view of meaning. Certainly, there can be a great deal of interference with, or disruption of, activity without such interference [or] disruption giving rise to objects to the acting

organism. This occurs continuously in the behavior of animals and happens many times in human activity; in such instances the acting organism whether animal or human merely shifts approaches and adjustments (well handled by the scheme of Gestalt psychology of re-establishing equilibrium and field). But in the case of human activity the checking of action may bring into play the particular kind of activity that Mead and I have in mind in speaking of "making an indication." The making of an indication is a social act; it presupposes an actor making an indication, someone to whom the indication is being addressed, and the thing that is being indicated. Now, the human being by virtue of having become a "self," i.e., being able to act toward himself as an object, is able to make indications to himself. He can note "this or that thing," and in doing so he makes objects of what he notes or points out to himself. These objects, these things that he points out to himself, are the things that have meaning in the sense of significance. In designating them to himself the human being is arousing or setting into play his preparation to act toward them, without such preparation to act going over immediately or automatically into overt expression. The preparation to act is aroused in the case of what is noted but the preparation, though aroused, is checked and suspended, appearing in the form of an object. The object is cut out and suspended instead of being automatically acted toward. In being so suspended and held, in being seen in terms of its meaning, the object thus serves the person in building up and organizing his action toward it. The person instead of responding automatically and immediately, can use the object to build up a line of action in terms of how he takes the object into account in constructing a line of action.

Two things should be noted in terms of what I have said in the previous paragraph. First, the discussion sets a fundamental distinction between a "stimulus" and an "object." In strict accordance with its logic a stimulus is merely an inciting agent which calls forth automatically a response from the organism along the line that the organism is sensitized or prepared to respond; the stimulus coerces the response that is set by the responding readiness of the organism. As such the stimulus does not have and could not have any meaning to the organism nor appear as an object. In contrast, an object is not responded to automatically; it is cut out and held in suspension, however fleetingly, by being designated. Thus, its meaning can be used in planning out a line of action. I repeat that stimuli in their logical sense can have no meaning to the responding organism; however, if and when the organism designates them they become objects—something entirely different. This is one of the points that Morris misses. [It results in . . .] his failure to distinguish between attitude and "consciousness of attitude," and, thus,

[in] his miserable attempt to squeeze meaning inside of the conventional stimulus-response scheme.

The second matter to be noted is that, for Mead and for me, the designation or indication of objects constitutes the nature of "consciousness." This, incidentally, is in accordance with common folk usage, as when we say that we are conscious of something. Consciousness is always consciousness of something—that I am alive, that I am writing this letter, that I have been unconscionably tardy in doing so, and so forth. To be conscious of something is to note it, to point it out, to make an object of it. Conscious life consists of making indications. As Mead was repeatedly saying, consciousness is action.

Let me pull together and present in summary form what I have said above since, in my judgment, it represents what Mead meant by "meaning." He identified meaning with "significance" as distinguished from "implicit meaning." Meaning arose in the form of the acting organism making indications to itself. The things that are indicated are objects. Objects are what have meaning. The meaning of an object consists of the way in which the person is prepared to act toward the object. This preparation to act toward the object is a readiness and anticipation to carry out a complex act, embodying within it prospective movement of the actor, the actions and responses of others implicated in the act, and sensuous experiences in carrying out the act. The preparation to act is checked, thus allowing the aroused preparation to appear to the actor in the form of an object. As something that is indicated, the object is not, logically, a stimulus—it does not operate automatically or coercively to evoke a response. . . . [I]nstead, [it] is held in suspension[,] thus allowing the actor to build up action toward or around it, that is to say to take it into account and handle it within the line of action in which the actor is engaged. Just because the object is noted, taken into account, and handled in the act in which the actor is engaged, its meaning may be transformed. [I]t may be indicated in a new way; thus, a chair may be seen and used as an instrument for smashing a window and . . . providing for escape from a perilous situation. Meaning, then, exists in objects as indicated by the actor in carrying on his activity.

The account which I have given of meaning as treated by Mead is skeletalized . . . [and] does not include the fuller explanation that should be given of the way in which the actions of others define objects to the actor; such a fuller explanation would lead one into the rich and relatively unstudied field of role-taking, especially [taking] the role of the generalized other. Further, the account does not deal adequately with the place of meaning within what Mead speaks of as the "social act"—the joint act inside of which the individual act[s] of participants are

being formed. Nevertheless, the synoptic picture which I have sketched presents, I believe, the important points in Mead's conception of meaning. . . .

Even though what you present as criticism coming from the philosophers of meaning is directed toward Morris' views of "dispositions" and "signs" and not to Mead's view of meaning, let me say a few words about the criticism. Apparently, the criticisms rest on the premise that one must distinguish between on one hand meaning as "constituted by the conventional rules which govern the use of expressions, which determine whether they are appropriate or inappropriate to the occasions and circumstances of their use . . ." and on the other hand meaning as the "psychological causes or effects which language has on its users. . . ." There are so many undefined terms and hidden premises in these two propositions that I hesitate even to comment on their opposition. Instead, let me approach the area of criticism by focusing on specific and concrete instances of meaning. On one occasion a given person (Y) tenders a chair to a guest for the latter to seat himself; on a different occasion Y[,] who is trapped in a locked room which is on fire, uses the chair as an instrument to smash a window, thus allowing him to escape. In the first instance, Mead would say, the chair has a meaning as a receptacle in which to place one's body; in the second instance, as a means of breaking [out] an exit. Let us assume, also, that Y tells no one about his having tendered the chair to the guest or having used the chair to smash the window. Would the philosophers who you quote say that the chair had no meaning to Y on either or both occasions? If they admit that the chair had for Y the two respective meanings represented by the two instances[,] how would they explain these meanings in terms of "certain standards or rules of language"? This is the sort of thing that puzzles me in trying to grasp the explanation of meaning made by those who are committed to linguistic analysis.

Meaning in its concrete character is always meaning of something and necessarily always meaning for someone. . . . I can think of no single instance where this is not the case. If this . . . [were] the empirical and experiential character of meaning, its analysis would have to start from such empirical instances. This is what I think Mead has done. I do not know of any empirical instance that cannot be handled in terms of his scheme. Nor do I find anything important that is omitted by his scheme; I would be delighted to have a clear indication of what his scheme omits. On the other hand, I detect a larger number of concrete instances of objects in which the meaning cannot seemingly be grasped in terms of the standards or rules of language usage. Perhaps my difficulty lies in not knowing what is covered by "standards or rules." For me, and I think certainly for Mead, language consists of making indications (significant gestures) either to another or to oneself. The making of such indications certainly falls inside of a

framework of rules of usage. But, this framework . . . sets limits on the indicating process in place of determining the indications that are made. The meaning of objects and the change in the meaning of objects have to be sought in the defining process in the individual and the group and not, as far as I can see, in linguistic rules or standards.

I would invite you, if you wish, to pick up the discussion at this point and . . . address the following questions:

1. Is not meaning *always* meaning of something that is designated?
2. Is not meaning *always* to be found to be meaning for the person making the designation?
3. Is not the thing that is designated always picked out and held in suspension as something of which one is conscious instead of being automatically responded to?
4. Does not the character or meaning of the thing that is designated consist of what the individual designates and, thus, depend on how the person indicates the thing?
5. Does not the character of the thing that is designated exist in the form of how the person sees it and is prepared to act toward it in terms of the action in which he is engaged? (Let us put aside the very important question of how the person came to be prepared to see and act toward the thing.)
6. Does not the thing that is designated allow the person to build up differential action toward it or with regard to it, that is to say, use it in forming his action?
7. If the meaning of the thing is not set by the way in which the person designates the thing in terms of the line of action he is pursuing but instead arises from the standards and rules of language, what are such rules and standards and how do they work in concrete instances? Use the instances of the use of a chair mentioned in earlier discussion.

. . . [T]hank you for the reference to the volume of philosophical essays on Mead which you say are being edited by Professor Morris Eames of Southern Illinois University. I plan to write to him about the book since I will be much interested in examining it.

**ITEM 3: Social Behaviorism in the Thought of George Herbert Mead**  
**[Blumer, undated notes. Ed.]**

I think it is highly desirable to clarify the meaning of the term, "social behaviorism" in Mead's thought. I wish to begin by saying that the term was alien to



Mead's working vocabulary. I never heard Mead use the term in the many lectures of his which I attended, nor in the many discussions that I had with him as his research assistant. Further, I have no recollection of his use of the term in his writings, [and] if he did use it, it was on exceedingly rare occasions.<sup>1</sup> It is safe and accurate to say that the term "social behaviorism" was introduced into Mead's thought not by Mead but by others.

Since the term is essentially an insertion made by others into Mead's scheme of thought, it is highly important to see that the insertion does not alter Mead's intended analysis. The necessary protection is given, I believe, by recognizing clearly what Mead has in mind in his use of the separate terms, "behavior," and "social." He used these two terms constantly in explaining his point of view. Let us examine carefully what he had in mind in his use of each of them as applied to human conduct.

As students of Mead's thought know, he was vigorously opposed to the traditional separation of "mind" and "body" in which mind was regarded as non-physical. For Mead, the mind represented movement or action on the part of the human body. For Mead, mental activity is physiological activity. To think necessarily involves the combined play of muscles, nerves, and glands. An impulse, a wish, an image, a feeling, or an idea is each a form of physiological action, an instance of the human body in physical movement. To this extent, Mead agreed with Watson and the group that [we] might speak of as the physiological behaviorists. For Mead, to repeat, mental activity was physiological activity.

However, for Mead, while mental activity is necessarily physical activity, it is something more than mere physiological activity. It is also social activity. And it is this social dimension that sets mental activity apart from solely physiological activity. Social activity does not imply a rejection or absence of physiological activity; it means instead, something that so-to-speak, is added to physiological activity. Introducing the term "behavior" here, I wish to say that Mead saw "mind" as behavior. For him, the mind was definitely physiological behavior. It was also "social" behavior. What was he pointing to in using and applying here the term "social"? This is the heart of the matter. Mead derives the meaning of the term from his picture of "society." Mead saw a "society" whether human, animal, or insect as a group of organisms engaged in adjusting to one another as they carried out the activities that make up the life of the society. He spoke of these activities as "social acts." I prefer to call them "joint" acts to emphasize that they are a fitting together of diverse acts into larger combined acts. The social or joint act is for Mead both the basic unit and the representative expression of a society. To illustrate, in an insect society the social or joint act may be rigidly fixed as in the flight of honeybees in gathering nectar. In a loose animal society such as a herd

of cattle[,] the social acts, as Mead points out, are few and simple[,] as in grazing; in human societies, the social acts may be exceedingly diverse, ranging from a simple arrangement in a small hunting expedition in a primitive society, to the huge complex undertaking of a modern nation engaging in a world war.

To shift focus for a moment, students of human behavior should keep in mind that: (1) It is obviously possible to engage in essentially the same physiological movements while engaging in vastly different forms of social behavior. And, (2) it is possible to engage in essentially the same social action even though one is using a variety of different physiological movements.

Coughing as a warning signal, when seen from Mead's point of view, is significant not as an act of coughing but instead as a warning. To be studied, socially, one focuses not on its particular overt form, much less the physiology that is involved, but on its character that links the act to the activity or response of others. In this case, it is the warning aspect of coughing that is significant, and not the coughing as such. There could be, essentially, a number of alternative ways of conveying the warning, each one of which is different from the others as a form of overt behavior. In the given social act, what is important is not the overt form of the participant's act but its meaning (i.e., the warning). This is what has to be identified and analyzed.

There is a definite need to distinguish the social dimension of behavior from the physiological dimension of such behavior. The two must not be confused with each other. Neither represents the other. And research—completely justifiable research—carried out in the case of one dimension should not be thought of as having the prospects of contributing knowledge to the other dimension. The two dimensions lead in different directions. These observations can be illustrated by a simple human act, such as coughing. Coughing may occur as a result of irritation in the throat or it may be employed deliberately as a warning signal to another person to refrain from doing something. Physiologically, these two acts of coughing may be essentially the same. Socially, however, there may be a vast difference between them. One cannot perceive or identify this social difference by studying the physiological dimension. The social dimension lies in a different direction.

The basic feature of the "social" in an act lies in its connection with the action (line of action) of another person. The connection means merely that the given act gets its character from its relation to the act of another. The character and the meaning of the act arise from the act of the other to which it is directed. For example, the cough that is used as a warning signal gets its meaning and character precisely from this warning feature and not from the physiology that is involved in its execution. The social character of the cough comes precisely from the fact

that the cough has become part of a joint act involving the action of another person.

The obvious implication of this short discussion should be clear. To study human behavior in its social dimension it is necessary to bring into consideration the relation of the behavior to the behavior of others. The meaning of the "social" in the behavior lies in this area of relationship, i.e. in the actual or possible joint act. This outward area of relationship between acts of participants is very different from the "composition" of the single individual act, itself, or a mere addition of such single individual acts.

For Mead, a "social act" is not an individual act that has a social dimension or aspect. Instead, it is a joined act consisting of two or more individual acts that fit together. The social aspect or character of the individual act that enters into the social act is represented by and derived from its being a part of the joint act consisting of the fitting together of the individual acts. If the individual acts are not adjustments to each other, if they are unrelated and do not fit together, they are not social in Mead's sense of the term.

The "social" cannot be conceived as a *mere response* to a so-called social stimulus, i.e., an action that is induced by another, by a "stimulus" of another; nor is it something done by one that brings about a response by another. The social is not constituted by a mere stimulus-response arrangement. The stimulus and the response, seen as forms of action, have to fit together, to fit into each other, to form a joint ongoing act in order for either of them to be social. To be social, an individual act, or portion thereof, has to fit into a joint act. The point of reference is this joint act; in its social aspect the act of an individual refers to the act of another to which it has to adjust. To catch the social, one has to respect and catch this joint relation. This joint relation is not caught by the physiology of the acts of the involved individuals. The social is an outward spread, which incorporates the acts of others into the joint arrangement.

Another way to put the point, sticking close to Mead's language, is that the meaning of one's gesture is given by the response of the other person as a form of social action. The gesture in itself is meaningless. One might study it, by itself, ad infinitum and never get its social significance. It becomes socially meaningful only when it is seen as part of the social or joint act, which necessarily must include the act of the other person, which is the anticipated or actual response to the gesture. Behavior [, thus, has these dimensions:] [p]hysiological, [o]vert, [c]overt, [s]ocietal, and [s]ocial.

A given human action or bit of behavior, such as coughing, may not even be a gesture. . . . Further, the same cough may be a different gesture to different people—to one it is a warning; to another a sign that the person should go to a

doctor; to another that the person who is coughing is obnoxious and should remove himself. It is obvious that the cough, as a gesture, could fit into a wide variety of differing acts of others, and thus have different meaning. The common physiological action in the cough does not catch at all these different social aspects or components of the cough.

#### ITEM 4: Blumer Letter (October 30, 1981) to Mr. Peter Mills

I am finally managing to write to you with regard to the review [an early draft of Mills 1982] which you have prepared on the book by J. David Lewis and Richard L. Smith [1980]. . . . I have read your review with much interest. I think that it is excellent. There is nothing in it to which I would take exception. In my opinion you have given an accurate depiction of Mead's thought on the matters you are discussing and you have connected that thought correctly with the thought of William James. While I am not well informed in the thought of Charles Peirce I am impressed by the distinction you draw between his view of reality and the view of reality held by Mead. You have demonstrated the misunderstanding and misrepresentation of Mead's position that is advanced by Lewis-Smith. I agree with your observations that flow from this misrepresentation in the Lewis-Smith treatment.

In my judgment, Lewis is very defective in his understanding of pragmatism as such as well as of Mead's pragmatic position. This is shown, first of all, in his curious contention that Mead and John Dewey are to be set over against each other in their respective pragmatic positions. This contention (a matter which you understandably do not treat) is absurd to the point of being scandalous. Both Mead and Dewey never disguised their basic intellectual kinship, their possession of a common philosophical perspective, which they had built up and reinforced over decades of intimate association. To seek to sever their common intellectual perspective, as Lewis attempts, by declaring that Mead was a "realist" while Dewey was a "nominalist" shows a grievous misunderstanding not only of both of them but of pragmatism as such.

Lewis fails to see what I believe is central in the pragmatic perspective of reality, namely, that reality lies at the point of contact between the empirical world and the knower of that world. Reality emerges in a process in which the knower (1) is establishing the composition and character of the empirical world by indicating or asserting what it is and (2) is using that empirical world to test the validity of the indications and assertions. This is what takes place both in everyday human experience and in the exacting procedure of science. In everyday experience human beings are engaged in identifying the world that confronts

them. They do this by pointing out objects to themselves or to others, e.g., "There is a table," "I have an appointment at ten o'clock," "Here comes my wife," "It is raining," etc. It is this process of indication which establishes or "cuts out" their empirical world. However, whether the empirical world . . . cut out or indicated is real depends on whether an examination of the empirical world that is thus cut out . . . bears out the indication. Thus, through examination one may find that indeed the object is a table; or after consulting an appointment sheet find that the given appointment is not at ten o'clock but at eleven o'clock. This same process of indication and validation takes place, even more exactly, in the realm of science: reality emerges out of a process of stating a problem with regard to the makeup of an empirical world, advancing an hypothesis or assertion as to what that makeup is, and then carefully examining that empirical world to see if the hypothesis is sustained. It is this process, which I am outlining so simply, that pragmatists have in mind when they say that what works is what is real.

An analysis of this process of human experience in which reality emerges, is tested, and is established, suggests the weakness of the traditional positions of both "realism" and "idealism" in philosophy. The dependency of this reality-forming process on what is indicated or asserted is a direct challenge to the premise that reality has a makeup which is fixed, eternal, and absolute; indeed, the examination of everyday experience and of the history of science shows abundantly and decisively that indications or assertions about the empirical world are not fixed but are changeable, one giving way to another. The fact that the empirical world may be continually addressed anew both in everyday experience and in the realm of science is an implicit denial of the realist's premise that the empirical world has basically a fixed, granite-like character, merely waiting to be revealed. But, to continue, an examination of the reality-forming process that human experience turns out to be, shows also that the empirical world is inescapably "there" as the testing stone of the validity of the indications or assertions that are made about the empirical world. The failure to acknowledge this is the weakness of the traditional position of idealism.

I think that Lewis just does not understand this basic position of pragmatism which anchors "reality" in human experience—an experience in which both the empirical world and assertions about it are caught up in an interplay in which each affects the other and in which both can change. I think you brought out much of this in your careful comparison of the views of Mead and Peirce. Mead, like James and Dewey, used the process of human experience to develop his view of reality; it appears that Peirce did not use this process but instead took the products of the process to develop his view.

Let me add a few words with regard to how Mead analyzed the process of

human experience, the process in which empirical reality is formed and tested. For Mead this was genuinely a social process. First, the making of indications is, in itself, definitely a social act; it involves someone who makes the indication, someone to whom the indication is made, and the object that is indicated. It is fundamentally an act of communication or, as Mead said so often, an act of discourse. One of the great contributions of Mead was his view that the human being can make indications to himself—as one does when he indicates that “there is a table,” or that “I have a ten o’clock appointment.” The making of indications to oneself is seen by Mead as being as much of a social process as is the making of indications to others. In addition, for Mead indications are themselves social creations; that is to say they are symbols that are socially formed. The symbols, “a table,” “an appointment,” “my wife,” etc., in their respective meanings, are formed in the defining process of human interaction. Finally, for Mead the process of validating assertions is clearly a social process, whether the validation is given by oneself or by others. In these three fundamental ways . . . Mead recognized that the human process of knowing and handling the empirical world was a genuine social process.

It is with this picture in mind that we can address the topic of “social behaviorism” which Lewis definitely misinterprets in his treatment of Mead. [The term] can be used to distinguish Mead’s view from that of Watson and that of the behaviorists in general. When so used, in the interest of bringing out a difference, it is necessary to specify what Mead had in mind in his use of the term “social.” To do this we have to go to what Mead spoke of as the “social act.” For Mead, engaging in a social act was the *mark* of a *society*, whether it is a human, an animal, or an insect society. The social act, for Mead, was what I prefer to call a “joint act”; it is an act involving two or more participants who in adjusting their respective lines of activity to one another give form to a collective act. The joint act is not a mere adding of the separate individual acts to each other; it is a fitting of them together to form a kind of transcending collective act, as for example in a conversation or a bargaining transaction. The joint act need not be cooperative in the sense of harmony; it may be marked by adversarial positions and conflict. To come back to my concern here, I want to stress that Mead lodged the “social” in the social or joint act.

Accordingly, “social behaviorism” in the sense of Mead’s thought, has to be seen in the form taken by behavior in the social or joint act. The vital question is “How do participants in the joint act adjust to one another, or come to fit their respective lines of behavior to each other?” . . . Mead’s answer . . . constitutes, I think, one of his great contributions. His answer is that human beings fit their lines of behavior to one another by interpreting and understanding each other’s

actions. Thus, one responds to a request, command, order, or indication from another by interpreting and understanding the request, command, etc. By such interpretation, one gets the *meaning* of the request, command, or indication. If the recipient of a request understands it, i.e., catches its meaning, he can guide his response to fit the request. This is what Mead had in mind by the "significant symbol"—an indication that has the same meaning for the indicator that it has for the person to whom it is addressed. In Mead's eyes the formation of joint acts in human societies takes place fundamentally (although not exclusively) by the use of significant symbols or shared meanings. . . . Social behavior, when it takes place through the use of significant symbols, is to be seen, then, in terms of the meaning that it has for the participants.

To see human social behavior this way not merely invites, but compels, its distinction from behavior that is seen in the conventional behavioristic manner. Behavior seen in terms of meaning (i.e., how it is interpreted to fit into joint acts) is of a fundamentally different gender than . . . behavior . . . seen in terms of physiological makeup, or in terms of its overt form. This crucial point is easy to show. Let me use as an example the act of insulting someone. One may engage in a large variety of alternative ways to make the insult. One may address the person verbally, using different language; one may use insulting gestures without uttering a word; one may write an insulting letter; one may employ a messenger to transmit the insult; one may spread insulting rumors about the person, and so forth. Each of these alternative forms of the insulting act would be vastly different, physiologically, from the others, involving very different neuro-muscular patterns. Similarly, each of the alternative forms would be very different from the others in terms of its overt form: writing, talking, using different gestures, carrying a note, using a telephone, paying a boy money to deliver a message, etc. What should be decisively clear is that an act is insulting not because of its physiological components but because of its *meaning*, that is to say, the way in which it is interpreted.

In my opinion, Lewis and Smith fail completely to see this simple point which is so basic to the thought of Mead. To think that in his case, "social behaviorism" is merely an addition of some kind of relationship to a fundamental physiological groundwork is to do injustice to Mead's thought. Similarly, to think in his case that social behavior is merely overt behavior apart from how it is interpreted by the participants in the social act is to grossly misrepresent Mead. As I have said, for Mead, human social behavior was fundamentally (but not exclusively) behavior . . . based on meaning, i.e., how it was interpreted by those in a joint act.

Let me explain the parenthetical qualification in the preceding sentence. By it I mean, merely, that Mead recognized that social or joint acts could be formed directly without relying on interpretation by the participants of each other's

behavior. This occurs through what I call nonsymbolic interaction, to distinguish it from the use of significant symbols. The formation of joint acts through nonsymbolic interaction is what takes place in insect and animal societies. Such formation can also take place in human society, but it is not the kind of interaction that, according to Mead, forms the typical social acts in human society.

Perhaps, I should also point out that Mead's analysis of joint acts renders untenable Lewis' depiction of the individual in human society. The individual side of the joint act consists in the individual forming his action and fitting it into the acts of others. This adjustment is not a mere coercion of his action by some kind of social determinant but requires guidance by the individual, based on how he interprets and meets the action of others. In participating in the joint act by interpreting the actions of others, human beings cannot be likened to cells in their relation in an organism, or atoms in their relation in physical matter, or insects in their genetically determined responses to each other. Instead, human beings, in this relation, have to *construct* their respective actions, however limited may be their leeway in doing so. In interpreting the joint act into which the human being has to fit, he has the possibility of shaping his act in different ways. Lewis fails to recognize that in the process of symbolic interaction the individual stands logically over against the field of his action instead of merely responding directly to it. . . . Let me close by saying again that I think you have written a remarkably fine and accurate review.

#### ITEM 5: Planning and Habit [Blumer, undated notes. Ed.]

Premises. Human behavior is not merely an adjustment to the present, but instead gets much of its character from a projected picture of the future. Human beings are universal in their ability and practice of anticipating the future. They live in their plans, hopes, wishes, and anticipated joys as well as in their apprehensions, fears, dreads, and anxieties. To be immersed in the present with no thought of the future means very likely the absence of a self.

If one were to take the life and experience of any human being, I am sure that one would find that a great deal of the experience of the person actually was with the future. The run of current experience would be found not to be thoroughly satisfying—and the individual would be looking forward to the possibility of more satisfying experiences.

This forward-looking projection probably centers around two things: planning and anticipated feeling. These are equivalent essentially to the old distinction of means and ends. Planning is something that we have to do almost constantly in our daily tasks—it should be so apparent as not to require any elaboration.



Whether the task has been so humdrum as arising from bed, getting dressed, going to school, studying or whether it be that of preparing for a future trip or arranging [one's] vocational career, planning is necessary and inevitable. In such planning, we may notice the following.

- a. A great deal of one's living is charted to and taken up with preparation.
- b. A great deal of behavior is in the nature of tasks. The word "task" is used here not as something onerous but merely to indicate what has to be done to live, to carry out the multitudinous little acts that must be carried out in order to live and to get along.
- c. Such preparation, such planning, is of course obviously antecedent to and necessary for actual behavior.
- d. Such preparation or planning obviously involves a process of observation, judgment, selection, discarding, and patterning, or linking together possibilities into a continual chain.

Behavior that has this character is clearly different from behavior that is merely in the nature of response to stimuli, or of reaction to the immediate present.

With reference to anticipated experience, we may merely note that as suggested above, . . . much of our life and experience is taken up with thoughts and images of desirable experiences which we hope for or with undesirable ones which we dread or about which we have anxieties. That these constitute in significant measure our goals—whether proximate or ultimate, cannot, I think, be denied.

Recognizing this forward looking character of planning or preparation with its implied inclusion of future possibility in present action, we should see habit in a different light. As applied to this type of behavior, habit is clearly not an automatic release of a mechanical act. For if behavior were of this sort there would be no planning or selective preparation. In viewing such planning, we should be concerned mostly with its range and flexibility. This, in turn, refers to the stability of situations for which preparation has to be made and to the stability of available means. Clearly, if the situations, which have to be met, are already well known—if the individual has previous experience with them—then his actions with reference to them are likely to become standardized. The whole process of selection and arrangement, in other words, is limited and predetermined. The same remarks apply equally well to the use of means. Where they are prescribed, they[,] of course, likewise limit the range of selection. Under such conditions, behavior becomes fixed and recurrent. The observation of such behavior can easily mislead one to an interpretation in terms of habit or fixed response;

whereas actually the behavior represents preparation and execution—but with preparation being limited and more prescribed.

That habit in the genuine and customary sense may enter into such stabilized preparation is true. This should be made clear. Through the repetitive performance of the same kind of task an individual may become increasingly sensitized in just a certain direction. In other words, the individual may have available in his surroundings many possibilities for selection and arrangement, yet consistently follow a narrow and fixed scheme. We may say that his orientation sensitizes him in one way and blinds him to other ways. In this way, an individual may be set; one can speak of this being habit. But it is habit in the sense of a predisposed set and is sensitivity, in the run of imagery, rather than in automatic response or mechanical release.

**ITEM 6: Reflections on the Thoughts of Sir Muhammad Iqbal [Blumer (circa 1975), paper presented at the United States International University, San Diego<sup>2</sup>]**

A few weeks ago my colleague, Professor Anwar Dil, graciously invited me to present before this conference some reflections on the thought of Muhammad Iqbal. I accepted the invitation with timidity since at the time I knew nothing about this eminent thinker and was unaware of the substance of his views. I have since had the opportunity to read his two major philosophical poems, which appear in English translation under the titles of "The Secrets of the Self" and "The Mysteries of Selflessness." My experience in reading these poems has been unusually provocative and rewarding. I discover that Iqbal had engaged in profound and brilliant expeditions of thought that are in striking accord with the most advanced thinking in my areas of scholarly competence. I would like to select for comment two of these central contentions of Iqbal which impress me as being at the forefront of contemporary scholarly reflections on the formation of the human personality.

The first of these two lines of thought of Iqbal that I find so revealing refers to the nature of the human self. Even though Iqbal's treatment of the topic is intuitive and philosophical he has succeeded in his genius in putting his finger on the most significant aspect of the human self, namely its need for completion. To say that the most important characteristic of the human self is its need for completion can easily propel one into the midst of the thickets of rhetoric, in which unfortunately most of our scholarly discussion of the topic is lodged. I wish to avoid such thickets and, instead, to explain on empirical grounds the need of the human self for completion. My impression is that Iqbal's insightful view of the matter was derived from the following kind of empirical observations.

First, the human self is to be seen as arising in the area of self-awareness and not in the mere fact of the human being being alive. The distinction here, I believe, is crucial. The vitality of organisms does not supply the essentials of selfhood, however indispensable and significant is that vitality. The earthworm burrowing into the soil, the bird scanning the ground for seed, the lion prowling for prey, and the human being searching for employment—all of these respective organisms are caught in the play of the vital physiological forces that account for life, itself. It is easy[,] on the basis of this vivid biological picture, to attribute selfhood to each organism—to say that the earthworm, the bird, the lion, and the human being has a “self,” a self which is identified with the efforts of the organism to live, to survive, to satisfy its biological impulses. Indeed, I must admit that many scholars of human experience—psychologists and social scientists—identify selfhood with mere biological existence; this is done with great frequency in their use of the concept of the “ego,” which is identified so much with biological striving. Yet, unless I misread Iqbal, he with his intuitive sensitivity recognized that selfhood was to be lodged in a different area than mere biological vitality. It was to be lodged, instead, in the area of perception and judgment of oneself. The self comes into being only when the organism makes an object of itself, when the organism can see and judge itself. When the organism can see and judge its conduct apart from merely engaging in the conduct, when accordingly the organism can view and judge itself in relation to its world in place of merely being in that world—it is then that selfhood comes into existence.

This view of the self, which I detect in Iqbal's treatment, has profound implications. The major implication which I wish to pick out refers to what I have previously spoken of as the need of the human self for completion. One can say that the insect or the animal suffers unfulfillment in its life, in the sense of having vital needs, such as hunger, sex, protection from the elements, or protection from parasites, which are recurrent and are never satisfied completely. Yet, these biological deprivations do not constitute an attack on selfhood; they do not lead the organism to identify some deficiency in its makeup, to judge itself as inadequate, nor do they launch the organism in the direction of personal achievement as over against the mere satisfaction of biological needs. The lack of fulfillment of the human self lies in a different area—in an area with a two-pronged character. On one hand, the area of self-unfulfillment is marked by the absence of *conceptions* of the self which would propel the individual along lines of personal achievement or personal realization. This prong or line of self-fulfillment exists, in other words, when the person fails for whatever reason to see himself and judge himself in ways that would impel him to pursue lines of personal development. The other line of self-unfulfillment lies in the failure of one's actions to measure up to what-

ever conception one has of himself; the discrepancy can be the source of a profound sense of incompleteness.

It is evident to me that Iqbal has addressed primarily the first of these two sources of self-deficiency. Indeed, his philosophical poem on "The Secrets of the Self" is a ringing clarion call to his compatriots in the Moslem faith to arouse themselves from lethargy and launch themselves along the lines of personal growth that are provided by the basic precepts of their religion. The vigorous call that he cries out is for them to see themselves anew, to form conceptions of themselves and their world that will release energies along new lines of pursuit, to see themselves as having opportunities and commitments that will imbue them with hope, confidence, and dedication. I gather from commentaries on Iqbal that he had enormous success in implanting and cultivating these new self-conceptions among his readers and his auditors, proving himself to be a most inspiring influence, especially in the intellectual circles of the Moslem faith.

In my judgment a large part of Iqbal's genius in these endeavors to awaken and enliven new self conceptions among his compatriots was an extraordinary ability to combine the fundamental precepts of the Moslem faith with a keen sensitivity to the challenges of modern life. He caught the universal verities that are embedded in the religious faith of his people, verities clothed with previous sentiment, and used them to forge visions of personal growth that would fit the peculiar nature of our modern world. This achievement should not be passed over lightly. It carries a profound lesson for scholars dealing with the topic of self-realization. The lesson is that the stimulants to awakened personal growth lie in the effective mobilization and application of collective images from one's society in place of narrow selfish goals. The stimulation to self-fulfillment lies less in the area of ego satisfaction and more in the guidance of action by the high levels of societal judgment.

The observation that I have just voiced leads me to the second of Iqbal's lines of thought which I find to be profound and advanced in its insight. This thought, so admirably developed in his poem on "The Mysteries of Selflessness," is that the realization of the self lies in seeking to achieve the supreme social values of human society. Let me explain this as I see it. The core of selfhood lies in the fact that one is judging one's self. Such self-evaluation is basic, regardless of what may be the criteria that one may be employing or the situation in which the evaluation is being made. The satisfactions or dissatisfactions which we experience in ourselves derive from judgments as to how we fare in meeting social standards of performance. We may compare ourselves with this or that person or view ourselves in terms of this or that expectation made by our associates, and judge ourselves in the light of such comparisons. As all of us should know, such

comparisons with our immediate fellows, or the use of the standards of our immediate groups, can lead to pronounced selfishness in the pursuit of personal aims. We are familiar with the array of unpleasant and repelling human traits which may arise from guiding one's actions by such narrow standards—traits such as envy, covetousness, greed, disrespect of others, and exploitation of others. Iqbal, in his effort to arouse strong feelings of self-striving and personal growth among his communicants, was well aware of the unfortunate possibilities that self-development could take these unpleasant forms. This is not what he wished. This he could not and would not condone. How did he handle this problem of selfishness? In my judgment he did not try to meet it by merely enunciating high moral principles. The condemnation of selfishness through the voicing of ethical precepts is in order and is indeed to be found here and there in memorable lines in Iqbal's poem. But he went far beyond such moralizing in his treatment of selfishness.

My impression is that Iqbal saw with his sensitive insight that the standards by which the human being judges his conduct and by which he judges himself as the agent of that conduct always have a transcending character. That is to say, the standard that is used always carries with it a moral judgment that extends far beyond the particular group or community to which it may be applied. The moral standard or demand, such as let us say "to be honest," embodies or implies a universal sanction; it reigns, if you please, as a guide or an injunction that transcends the immediate situation to which it applies. It transcends, also, the particular relation between the people in the situation. It transcends, further, the particular group of whose code it is a part. The evaluative standard pertains, instead, to a universal human relation—to a feature which is intrinsic to human existence, here and everywhere, to now and every time.

To say that the moral standards or criteria by which one judges himself have an implicit universal status is to voice what seems to be an elusive thought. Yet, I think the thought is basically simple. It means that logically the moral criterion has no spatial or temporal boundaries; and that whatever limits may be imposed on the range of its application in actual use contradicts its essential nature. An exercise of honesty, for example, which is confined to just this or that occasional instance of conduct belies the intrinsic universal nature of the precept of honesty as a guide of conduct. One must realistically note the same implicit universal extension in the case of all basic lines of self-judgment.

Iqbal very correctly perceives the implication of this point as he treats the topic of the realization or actualization of the self. He sees clearly that the world that is brought into existence by selfhood is a universal world, a world which is not confined to this or that group to which one belongs but is, instead, a world

of limitless humanity. And, it is to this world of humanity that adjustment has to be made if the self is to achieve its full realization. Else there is the incompleteness of satisfying merely a restricted self. The unfulfilled demand of the larger universe lingers on the horizon, however much it may be ignored or shunted aside. The guidance and evaluation of oneself by standards which call intrinsically for an unrestricted universal application [provide] both the challenge to and the means of bringing the self to full realization. The failure to respond to the call for universal application becomes the source of selfishness. The guidance of oneself to meet the implicit demands of humanity sets the pathway to genuine self-realization. This is the pathway of *selflessness*.

As I reflect on these few remarks of mine I realize how pale and lifeless they are in comparison to the vivid, imaginative, decisive, and gripping manner in which Iqbal has developed and presented this line of thought in his penetrating analysis of selfhood. Iqbal is clearly not only a profound thinker but also a supreme artist in the presentation of his thought. He has much to teach us both in substance and in manner.

## Notes

1. See Mead (1934: 6) for one of those rare occasions. *Ed.*
2. A renowned Islamic poet and social thinker, President of the Muslim League in 1930, Iqbal is also considered by many to be an influential figure in the emergence of modern Pakistan. *Ed.*

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# Appendix 3

## HERBERT BLUMER: A BIOGRAPHY



THE YOUNGEST OF THREE CHILDREN, Herbert George Blumer was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on March 7, 1900. His father, Richard George Blumer, was born in Philadelphia and worked as a cabinetmaker. His mother, Margaret Marshall Blumer, along with her younger brother, had been orphaned at a young age and was raised by a German couple. Herb recalled his mother being a voracious reader and a loving, hardworking individual.

Herb spent the early part of his life on a five-acre farm outside St. Louis. Attending a one-room schoolhouse two miles from home, he finished grammar school in 1913. When he was halfway through high school, the family business burned and Herb left school to help the family rebuild. Soon, though, his parents encouraged him to go to business school to learn to be a stenographer. Still a teenager living at home, Herb contributed his stenographer's wages to the family.

Growing up, Herb was an avid reader of socialist literature and daydreamed about becoming a humanitarian world leader. Reasoning that a more substantial education would be needed to assume such a role, he focused upon going to college and, by studying intensively for seven months, was able to make up the last two years of high school. He gained admission to the University of Missouri in 1918.

In his first year at Missouri, Herb joined the university-supported Student Army Training Corps and also became a member of two debating societies. To help pay for his education, he spent the summers of 1919 and 1920 in Western Canada working with the Chautauqua program (a traveling education and entertainment venture based in Missouri and Illinois). This gave him some exposure to a variety of well-known speakers and performers on tour. By the time he graduated from Missouri, Herb had been elected captain of both the football and the debating teams.

It was at Missouri that Herb took his first sociology course (taught by Charles Ellwood). Herb smiled when talking about this course, observing that he knew



nothing about the discipline of sociology at the time. Apparently, he was initially drawn to this course because he thought it was a course in socialism. Still, Herb became a sociology major and, in 1922, with Ellwood as his supervisor, he completed his master's thesis, "Theory of Social Revolutions." That same year, Herb married Marguerite Barnett; they later had one child, Katherine.

After completing his M.A., Herb taught at the University of Missouri prior to enrolling in the doctoral program at the University of Chicago in 1924. While a graduate student and part-time instructor at the University of Chicago, Herb also played professional football for the then Chicago Cardinals (in the era of football greats such as Red Grange, Bronko Nagurski, and Jim Thorpe). After his professional playing career ended with a knee injury in 1933, Herb continued with the sport for another three years as the head "line coach" at the University of Chicago.

When he reflected on his early life,<sup>1</sup> Blumer observed that his zeal for becoming a humanitarian leader diminished somewhat after he considered the views of the psychologist Max Meyer, with whom he had studied at Missouri. He recalled noting that Meyer's rigorous neuropsychological analysis of human thought and behavior stood in stark contrast to Ellwood's abstract, value-oriented perspective.

Herb moved further away from a more direct socialist emphasis on reform after taking one of Robert Park's courses at Chicago. He seems to have listened particularly intently when Park said that if one wanted to change the society, one had better first know how that society worked.

When Herb was a graduate student at Chicago, the department was comprised of sociologists Ellsworth Faris (then chair), Robert Park, and Ernest Burgess, as well as anthropologists Edward Sapir and Fay Cooper-Cole. Though he concentrated his studies in sociology, Blumer also took courses with George Herbert Mead in the philosophy department. It was here, with Mead's social behaviorism as the core, that he established the foundations of his own perspective in social psychology.

While Mead served on the dissertation committee, Herb worked primarily with Ellsworth Faris in developing his Ph.D. thesis, entitled "Method in Social Psychology." In it, Herbert Blumer reviewed developments in the field of social psychology and addressed the problematic nature of studying social life and of generating empirically grounded, verifiable assertions. In his dissertation, he considered an array of social theorists according to the success with which they isolated the unique features of human group life and the human capacity for minded (linguistically informed) activity. Herb insisted that the social sciences could not build valid depictions of the nature of social reality, in general, and action, in particular, if they relied on methodologies of the physical sciences. To be viable,

a science has to respect the nature of its subject matter. Because humans differ so substantially from the subject matters of the physical sciences, a notably different methodology that respects those distinctively human differences would be required.

Although social scientists are unable to achieve the precision characteristic of the physical sciences, Herbert Blumer argued that the most appropriate methodology to pursue was a modified view (one that does not locate the meaning of objects solely in the mind) of what Cooley had termed "sympathetic introspection." This perspective lies at the heart of what is now better known as "ethnographic research." Emphasizing the need for sustained contact and intimate verbal interchange with the human other, Herb envisions this methodology as the most central and authentic means of developing a social science that respects its human subject matter. As he also notes, this methodology may not seem scientific by the criteria and practices of the physical sciences, but for those who intend to understand human group life and human behavior within the human group, there is no viable alternative.

Herb had been teaching at the University of Chicago on a full-time basis when George Herbert Mead became ill in 1931. Mead asked Herb to take over his advanced social psychology course. The opportunity to engage Mead's work in this fashion appears to have been a consequential point in Herb's definition of himself as a scholar of the human condition.

The 1930s also brought some changes in Herb's personal life; he and Marguerite divorced in the late 1930s after a lengthy separation. In 1943, Herb married Marcia Jackson, with whom he had two daughters, Linda and Leslie.

As his publication record shows, Herbert Blumer's scholarly career flourished at Chicago. Still, one might acknowledge some of Herb's other midlife involvements. As part of the war effort, Herb worked as the principal liaison officer for the Department of State's Office of War Information and as the Public Panel chair of the War Labor Board (1943–1945). A charter member of the U.S. Board of Arbitration, he also served as chair of the U.S. Steel Corporation and United Steelworkers of America's board of arbitration (1945–1947).

After taking a leave from Chicago in 1950–1951, which he spent at the University of Hawaii, Herb left Chicago to serve as the chair of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley. He held that position from 1952 to 1958, during which time he embraced enthusiastically the commitment of the university to build the premier sociology program in the United States.

Over the years, Herbert Blumer became a major contributor to American sociological theory. While best known for articulating the perspective of symbolic interactionism and for his allied work in social psychology, social theory, and

methodology, Herb also analyzed other aspects of group life, such as collective behavior, fashion, and labor and race relations, opening new lines of inquiry into these and related subjects. Blumer drew inspiration for his persistent scholarly focus on the study of action and human group life from the pragmatist philosophy of George Herbert Mead and the ethnographic methodology of Charles Horton Cooley. He also remained mindful of Robert Park's insistence on going into the community to study things directly.

Thus, for instance, Herb very much appreciated a fellowship he obtained in 1930 that enabled him to travel to Paris to study the fashion industry firsthand for about eight months. Fending off jokes about his choice of subject matter with good grace, he said that his work on the subject (Blumer 1968, 1969b) ranked among his most important contributions because it provided insight into a processual analysis of people's shifts in perspectives. These understandings of the nature of emergent social phenomena have a generic quality, he observed, and can be applied to the study of changes occurring in other areas of life, such as science, art, law, and architecture. His analysis addressed the fundamental question of how people, through interaction and collective acts, create, sustain, and change worlds of meaning.

Throughout his life, Herbert Blumer capitalized on similar involvement with people and situations to further his understanding of how the social world works. While at Chicago, for example, through his association with social and public health activist, critic, writer, and "King of the Hobos" Ben Reitman, Herb also became well acquainted with a broad sector of the Chicago underworld in the 1930s and early 1940s. Learning much about the ways the lives of these people corresponded to and differed from the lives of those with more conventional lifestyles, Herb developed a profound appreciation of the universal, or transcontextual, nature of human action in terms of people meeting and handling an ongoing stream of situations in their day-to-day lives.

It should be noted that Herbert Blumer was also exceptionally active in a variety of professional organizations inside and outside of academia. Herb was the secretary of the American Sociological Society from 1930 to 1935 and edited the *American Journal of Sociology* from 1940 to 1952. He was president, in 1956, of the American Sociological Association and of the Society for the Study of Social Problems in 1954. While directing the Institute of Social Sciences at U.C., Berkeley, from 1959 to 1965, Herb also served as the vice president of the International Sociological Association (1962–1966) and as president of the Pacific Sociological Association from 1971 to 1972. Mindful of his organizational contributions as well as the significance of his academic accomplishments, the Ameri-

can Sociological Association honored him, in 1983, with "The Award for a Career of Distinguished Scholarship."

There are a great many other aspects of Herb's life that could be discussed in this statement, but this shorter biographical account will serve its purpose if it provides only a modest sense of his involvement with, and greater attentiveness to, the full range of human social life. Perhaps, too, it may provide a glimpse of the rather exceptional courage that he displayed in promoting a distinctively humanist theory and methodology in an era in which the social sciences were heavily dominated by structuralist theories and quantitative methods.

Retiring from teaching in 1967, Herb remained professor emeritus until 1986. Herb's health declined significantly after 1985, and he died on April 13, 1987. However, after his retirement and virtually to his very last days, he remained focused on the quest to learn more about the human subject matter of the social sciences.

As with all scholars whose works transcend time and place, Herbert Blumer will have an enduring presence in the academic community for those who wish to comprehend and study human group life in precise, authentic, and empirical terms.

## Notes

1. I am grateful to my colleague Terry Arendell for providing me with a transcript of her conversations (1986–1987) with Herb about his life. Herb was Terry's dissertation advisor, and she became a close friend of his family. I also very much appreciate the thoughtful conversations I had with Herb's wife, Marcia (who died in 1998), and their daughters, Linda and Leslie. During the countless times I visited with Herb, they always made me feel most welcome.

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# INDEX



- Abbott, Andrew, xviii1, xix
- abstract role, 117–18
- act:
- collective, xv–xvi, 5–8, 10, 96–97, 101n3, 105, 111, 134, 169, 182
  - coordination, 97–98, 101n3
  - dispositions, 5, 17, 33–34, 38, 63, 66, 78, 83–84, 111, 137, 157, 162
  - guiding, 33
  - motivating, 33–34
  - formulating, 104
  - four major stages, 83–84
    - consummation, 83, 87
    - impulse, 83–84, 85–87, 93, 164
    - manipulation, 83, 86–87
    - perception, 83–87, 159
  - indication, xvi–xvii, 4–8, 24–31, 35–37, 45–47, 53–54, 63–65, 69, 71, 73–75, 78, 88–89, 92–94, 96, 105, 133–34, 138–42, 144, 156–63, 167–70
  - individual, 7, 10, 99, 100n1
    - construction of, 5, 74–76, 79, 82, 88, 91, 93, 99
    - features of, 70–71
    - motivational approach, 72
  - initiating agent, 71–74, 76, 79–83, 94
  - interpretation, xi–xii, xiv, xvi–xvii, 3, 7, 19–22, 24, 29–30, 35–37, 54, 100n2, 105, 114–15, 118, 147, 150–51, 170, 172
  - joint, 7, 9, 25–26, 33–34, 36–38, 94
  - new kinds, 93
  - social, xvi, xviii3, 4, 8, 10, 25–27, 37, 69–70, 94–99, 100n2, 101–2, 105, 109, 111, 113, 122, 125–28, 131, 133–35, 137–40, 146, 148, 160–61, 165–66, 169–71
  - complex, 98, 102, 127
  - disintegrating, 128
  - emerging, 128
  - hidden relationship, 102n5
  - joint acts, xiv–xv, 11n6, 37, 100, 134, 164, 170–71
  - subacts, xiv
- acting unit, x
- action:
- change:
    - human conduct, 70, 80, 82
    - social action, 78, 80–81, 90
  - new view of, x
  - plan of, 40, 43, 64, 85, 158
  - source of, 44
- adjustment process, 104, 133
- Ames, Edward Scribner, 10n1
- attitudes, 17, 22, 32, 50–51, 64, 76, 101n4, 114–16, 122, 124, 126, 129
- tendencies to act, 44–45, 50–51, 55n3, 85–86, 102n5, 136–37
- awareness, 20, 79, 113, 120, 129, 139, 146, 157, 159
- Bales, Robert F., 10–11n2
- Becker, Howard S., xv, xix

## behavior:

- covert, 137, 139, 143
- overt, 85, 136–37, 139, 141–45, 165, 170

## behavioral response, 136

- behavioral form, 136, 138

Blumer, Herbert, xi–xv, xviii, xix–xx, 1–9, 10n2, 11n2–n6, 91, 103–6, 107n1–n2, 109–10, 121–31, 135, 142, 146–47, 149, 153n1–n4, 155, 157, 163, 167, 171, 173, 179, 180–83, 185, 187–89, 191

Brewster, John M., 107n1

Burgess, Ernest, 103, 180

Campbell, James, 11n2

Chang, Yen-Ling, 107n2

Charlton, Joy, 11n7

## collective:

- activity, 16, 95
- actors, 141
- emotional state, 22

collectivity, xiii, 60, 111, 156

- interrelated activities, 60

- organized context, 60

common definition, 92, 121

common images, 91

common objects, 45–46, 92

common symbols, 27

common understanding, 27, 106, 127, 138, 140–42, 144–46, 148

communication, xvi, 13–14, 23, 27–28, 36, 41, 47, 106, 117, 127, 145, 169

complementary expectations, 37

complex actions, 97

conditioning of responses, 22

## continuity:

- of past and present, 59–60, 115–16, 128–29, 150–52

conventional approaches, 73

conversation of gestures, 18–23, 142

Cooley, Charles H., xi–xii, 181–82

Cooper-Cole, Fay, 180

creation of meaning, xii, 9

Dawson, Lorne, 11n4

defining process, 46, 54, 91–94, 163, 169

Dewey, John, xi–xii, xviii, 5, 3, 10n1, 13, 115, 130, 167, 168

Dil, Anwar, 173

divergence, 33, 47, 123

Dunham, Albert M., 107n1

Durkheim, Emile, 135

Duster, Troy, xviii, xix

Eames, Morris, 163

ego, 73, 79, 133, 174–75

Ellwood, Charles, 3, 179–80

emergence, 2–4, 93, 98, 106, 120, 149–50, 152

emergent character, xvii, 4, 120

Farberman, Harvey, 6

Faris, Ellsworth, 2, 3, 11, 180

fashion, xvi, 132, 182

field of action, 7–8, 43, 88, 90–92, 94, 102n5

Fine, Gary Alan, 2

fluid interplay, 35

free will, 77

Garfinkel, Harold, 11n7

generalized other, 5, 9, 60–62, 66, 67n2, 80, 98, 104–5, 109–21, 123–29, 131–32, 147, 151, 161

components of, 104, 106

guide, 120

hierarchy, 122, 126–27

interpretation of, 115

mechanism of adjustment, 117, 140, 151

primitive level, 120

voices of community, 110, 121–22, 126 inconsistent, 110

Gestalt psychology, 160

gesture, 5, 9, 18–29, 36, 54, 66, 89, 101, 105–6, 112, 120, 135–46, 149, 162, 166–67

common understanding, 27, 106, 127, 138, 140–41, 143–48

- diverse forms, 21
- indicatory, 28–29, 89
- response, 105, 136–37, 140–41, 143–48
- three directions, 26
- Giddens, Anthony, xviii5
- G.O. *See* generalized other
- group life, ix, xvi, xviii1, 6–10, 17–18, 22–23, 32, 35–38, 47, 60, 63, 67, 69–70, 88, 95, 97–98, 100, 101n4, 104, 117, 119, 132, 134, 150, 152, 180–83
- lines of action, x, xii–xiii, xv, 4, 6–7, 21, 29, 34–35, 37–38, 43, 53, 64, 78, 82, 88, 96, 100
- organized character, 7, 95
- group symbols, 21–22
- habit, 107, 114–15, 120, 123, 146, 148, 171, 173
- Hauser, Philip, xviii1
- Huber, Joan, 6, 11n2
- human action. *See* symbolic interactionism, root images
- human as actor. *See* symbolic interactionism, root images
- human being:
  - personality of, 50, 104, 116, 119–21, 173
- human conduct, 2–6, 8–10, 13, 15, 17, 21, 38–39, 47–50, 52, 55n2, 64, 67, 70, 74, 80, 82–83, 85, 92, 94, 106–7, 118, 134, 155, 164
- image, 71, 75, 85–87, 90–92, 94, 106, 164, 172, 175
- human groups or societies:
  - makeup, 41, 50–52, 54, 63, 110–11, 124, 132
  - operating organization, 50
  - social aspects, 104.
  - See also* symbolic interactionism, root images
- "I," the, I, 65–67, 68n3, 78, 104, 111, 113–14, 116, 122, 130–32, 134
- idealism, xi, xii, 168
- identify, 20, 39, 48–50, 52, 72, 79, 91–92, 98, 111
- interaction, x, xiii, xv–xvi, 4–5, 7–9, 17–24, 27–37, 45–47, 54, 61, 63, 65, 68n3, 69, 73, 87, 91, 96, 99, 101, 105–6, 131–33, 156, 169, 171, 182
- central position, 76, 82
- interpretation:
  - identification, 47–48, 50, 74, 91, 99
  - assessment, 6, 69, 91
- Iqbal, Sir Muhammad, 107, 173–77, 177n2
- James, William, xi, xviii5, 13, 130
- Lewis, J. David, 2, 11, 105, 129–30, 135, 146–49, 167, 170
- lines of action. *See* symbolic interactionism, root images
- List, Peter, 106, 157
- Maines, David R., xiv, xix, 6
- Malinowski, Bronislaw, 125
- Manis, Jerome, 107n2
- McHugh, Peter, 107n2
- McPhail, Clark, 146
- "Me," the, I, 65–67, 68n3, 78, 104, 111, 113–16, 130–32, 134, 148
- Mead, George Herbert, ix–xii, xvii, 1–10, 10n1–n2, 11n2, 13–15, 15n1, 18–29, 32, 34, 36–45, 47–55, 57–66, 67n1–n3, 69–73, 76–88, 90–94, 94n1, 95–99, 100n2–n5, 103–6, 107n1, 109–18, 120–52, 153n3, 157–71, 177n1, 180–82
- analysis of objects, 39, 41, 48, 50–51, 53
- scheme:
  - weakness, 133–34
- thesis of social interaction, 32
- treatment of the self, 57, 67, 69, 71, 148
- Meadian image of human contact, 106
- Meadian social thought, 106
- meaning, xii–xiv, 1–2, 5, 8–9, 19–30, 36–38, 41–52, 54, 55n2, 58, 86–87, 91–

- 92, 95, 105–7, 109–10, 113, 116–17,  
119–24, 127, 129, 135–67, 170,  
181–82  
implicit, 20, 157, 161  
Mehan, Hugh, 11n7  
Meltzer, Bernard N., 107n2  
Meyer, Max, 180  
Miller, David L., ix, 10–11, 103–7, 109,  
112, 129, 135, 141, 145–46, 148,  
150, 153n1–n2, 153n4  
Mills, Peter, 107, 167  
Morrione, Thomas J., xi, xiv, xvi, 6–8,  
107n2, 152, 153n3, 191  
Morris, Charles, 107n1, 157, 160, 162
- nominalism, 130, 147  
nominalist, 2, 130, 146, 167  
  realist-, 2  
non-Meadian perspectives, 114  
nonsymbolic interaction, 22, 23, 28, 171
- objectives:  
  as objects, 6  
objectivity, 48  
objects:  
  careers, xvi, 46  
  histories, xvi, 46  
  Mead definition of, 39  
  meaning of, xvii, 7–8, 42–52, 54, 55n2,  
    129, 155–56, 158–61, 163, 181  
  meaningless, 42  
  and private world, 9, 64–65.  
  *See also* symbolic interactionism, root  
    images  
operating environment, 8, 39–40  
oppositional stance, 132–33
- PP. *See Philosophy of the Present*  
Park, Robert, xi, xviii1, 103, 180, 182  
Peirce, Charles, 13, 130, 167  
personality, 50, 104, 116, 119, 120–21, 173  
*Philosophy of the Present*, 2, 116, 128, 148  
planning, 64, 107, 148, 171–72
- pragmatism, x–xii, xviii2, 4, 6, 107n1, 130,  
167, 168  
pragmatist, xi–xii, xviii2, 3–4, 8–10, 168,  
182  
  thought, 3  
Prus, Robert, xi, xix, 6, 7, 11
- Rand, Sally, 107n1  
realism, xii, 130, 147, 168  
realist, xi, 2, 11n2, 130, 146, 167–68  
Reitman, Ben, 182  
relationship:  
  adversary, 35  
  personal, 35, 119  
Rexroat, Cynthia, 146  
Riezler, Kurt, 119, 153n2  
role relations, 105  
role-taking, 27–28, 30, 49, 58–60, 62,  
67n1, 105, 113, 161
- Sapir, Edward, 180  
Schutz, Alfred, 11n5  
the self, ix, xvi, 1, 4–5, 9–10, 13, 31, 57, 59,  
63, 65–67, 69, 71–73, 77–79, 82, 92,  
104, 113, 118, 122, 130–33, 142,  
148, 174–77  
  becoming social, 5, 11  
  formation, 63–64, 78, 94–95, 118, 173  
  game stage, 58–59, 118  
  object unto oneself, 5  
  play stage, 58–59, 67n1  
  as process, 64–65, 67, 69, 71–83, 91–94,  
    104, 106, 109, 111, 116, 130–  
    34, 142, 145, 149  
self-awareness, 109, 174  
self-evaluation, 175  
self-fulfillment, 107, 174–75  
self-indication, xiv, 5–6, 8, 64, 74–80, 82–  
83, 92–93, 106  
  consciousness, 94, 109, 161  
  mind, 4, 13, 38, 64, 94, 112, 116, 121–  
    22, 148  
selflessness, 177  
Shabat, Oscar E., 152, 153n4

- Shalin, Dimitri, xi, xviin2
- significant symbol, 9, 18–23, 26–27, 113,  
120, 122, 127, 133, 135–37, 142,  
145–48, 170–71  
common response, 136–41, 146  
three stage communication, 143–45
- signification, 157
- situated interaction, xi
- situation, x–xiii, xvi, xviin3, 1, 6–10, 19, 36,  
47–48, 50, 53–54, 59–62, 64–67, 71,  
76, 88, 90, 92–93, 99, 109–10, 113,  
116, 118–25, 129, 139, 140, 156  
immediate situation, 89–90, 176  
structured situation, 54  
subsituation, xiv
- Skinner, B. F., 145
- Smith, Adam, 13
- Smith, Richard L., 2, 11, 105, 129–30, 135,  
146–49, 150, 153
- social action, ix–x, xiv, 6, 10, 26, 57, 69, 71–  
73, 76–83, 92–93, 164, 166  
central theme, 82  
joint activity, 60–61, 69, 95–96, 99n1,  
135  
as original datum, 69  
standardized, 92
- social behaviorism, 107, 163–64, 169–70,  
180
- social change, 47, 54, 115, 148–49
- social interaction. *See* symbolic interaction-  
ism, root images
- social life, x, xiv–xvi, xvin1, xvii, 3–5, 7–10,  
11n5, 180, 183
- social organization, 98–99, 132–34
- social reality, ix–xi, xiv, xvi, xviin2, xviin5,  
4–7, 9–10, 180  
obdurate character, xi, 6–7, 11n4
- social structure, xi, xiv–xvi, xviin4, 4–8, 10,  
31–36, 38, 69, 98–99, 99n1, 133, 140  
recursive model, 6
- sociality, 105, 116, 128, 151
- stimulus, 18–19, 22, 25, 28, 30, 47, 51–52,  
55, 62, 72–73, 83, 87, 101, 109, 139,  
157, 160–61, 166  
stimulus-response, xii, 51–53, 72, 161,  
166
- Stone, Gregory P., xviin4, 11n2
- subjectivism, xi
- symbolic interaction, x, xi, xii, xvii, 2, 4–9,  
11, 22–24, 29–33, 37, 46, 114, 123,  
130, 132, 142, 145, 147–48, 171  
devising a response, 30  
indication, 30  
interpretation, 30
- symbolic interactionism, xii–xiv, xvi, 1–2,  
4–5, 10n2, 11, 181
- root images, xii, xiv
- [1] human groups or societies, xiii, 17,  
22, 35, 45, 49–50, 119,  
165, 170
- [2] social interaction, xii–xiii, xvii, 2, 5,  
14, 17–19, 21, 23–25, 28,  
30–38, 44–47, 54, 54n1,  
58, 61, 65, 101n3, 131, 133
- [3] objects, xiii–xiv, xviin3, 4, 8–9, 29,  
38–42, 44–54, 54n1, 55n2,  
58–60, 62–65, 69, 71–74,  
76–77, 80, 83–84, 86–88,  
90–94, 98, 101n4, 102n5,  
107, 109, 117, 133–34,  
155–63, 168, 181
- [4] the human being as an actor, xii–xv,  
xviin3, 5–9, 24, 26, 29, 34,  
38–39, 42, 48–49, 53, 58,  
61, 66, 69–71, 74, 76–77,  
79–80, 82–83, 88–90, 92,  
94, 101n4, 105, 111, 118–  
19, 125–26, 132, 141,  
156–61
- [5] human action, x, xii–xiv, xvi, 2, 4,  
6, 14, 39, 41, 48, 54, 57,  
62, 67, 79, 81–82, 94, 166,  
182
- [6] the interconnectedness of lines of  
action, x, xii–xiii, xv, 4, 6–7,  
21, 29, 34–35, 37–38, 43,  
53, 64, 78, 82, 88, 96, 100
- symbolic interactionist, xi–xii



Thomas, William I., xi, 92

Tillich, Paul, 147

Tufts, James H., 10n1

unconscious, 5, 11n3, 17, 22, 31, 33, 79–80

universals, 45, 101n4, 113, 147, 150, 176,  
182

universe of discourse, 45, 92, 124, 126

Watson, John B., 145, 164, 169

Weltanschauung, 125

Wirth, Louis, 103

Wood, Houston, 11n7

Zeitgeist, 125

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